

Régis Debray

Undesirable Alien

Translated by Rosemary Sheed



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for Elisabeth

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Je remercie vivement Rosemary Sheed pour la version en anglais de *L'indésirable*, à laquelle j'ai moi-même collaboré, mais qui, sans elle, n'aurait jamais été ce qu'elle est.

Régis Debray

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The underground has its own aristocracy – an aristocracy of absence – and the highest title of all is conferred by death, by murder or execution. Death gives its noblemen their names and even their facial features. Unlike the more vulgar class of ministers and heads of state, the most eminent people in these secret military ranks only come to life by being put to death. Politicians shine when present and go out like lights when they leave the scene; they, on the other hand, pass directly from obscurity to immortality. Apart from artists, professional revolutionaries are the only professional body for whom, at the end of a lifetime's work, the removal of the corpse coincides with the removal of the disguise.

But, though it is almost a truism, this general law does not apply in the same way in every part of the world. It varies from one hemisphere to another, adapting to the climate and the changing length of the daylight hours. Frank, coming from a cold country, had always envisaged a revolutionary party or army as headed by a compact group of comrades who would receive reports from the periphery, study them thoughtfully together, and then send back directives affecting everyone in the organization down to the humblest. He had learnt from Lenin to see conspiracy as an indoor, winter occupation, somewhere between Finland and Siberia, Zürich and Petersburg. He pictured the Bolshevik leaders gathered round an earthenware stove with a samovar boiling on top of it, working long hours shut up in unfurnished, ill-lit, stuffy, smoky

rooms. He saw the little group of commissars with their caps pushed back, mufflers round their necks, talking quietly in a corner, plotting schemes for the future. (The windows, misted up inside, are half blocked by snow outside; one honest working man sits a little apart from the rest on a wooden stool, a pipe in his reddened hands; in the foreground, Lenin himself stands looking at the first copy of *Iskra*, the printer's ink not yet dry. . .)

Frank had come from Switzerland to the tropics with a picture of winter in his head, but this, like all the glamorous cardboard cut-outs of his adolescence, soon melted away in the sun. He found himself alone, and having to cope with hot weather conspiracy – the hardest of all to cope with, just because one is so alone. And the most risky too, because of the way everything keeps changing. Conspiracy here meant always being out: you'd just left, you were about to arrive, you were on the way, you were never actually *there*. Security, they called it. No fixed address. No family – at least not any more. No usual café. No car. Obviously no telephone. You couldn't be contacted because no one knew where to contact you, no one knew where you'd be next.

But was it *just* a question of not being followed and not being overheard? With Celia, she could slip through one's fingers so naturally – jumping without warning from a taxi into a bus going the opposite way; telling him she couldn't see him at such-and-such a time because she had an appointment in such-and-such a place, when in fact her appointment was at the opposite end of town and was actually with her hairdresser; putting her address-book into a different code every week – that it seemed more a matter of temperament than merely of security. It wasn't that she enjoyed it particularly or got great satisfaction from it: it was simply how she was, something genetic, like the way she liked cats, daiquiris and the colour blue, and disliked monkeys, Cuba libres and the colour green.

If she'd been canvassing openly in an election or organizing the most respectable meeting, she would have gone about it in precisely the same way. Should the Party at some stage decide that the time had come for a return to legal methods and public campaigning, she would of course change her vocabulary, but she could never change her nature. Celia, so free in changing her lovers, so flexible in accepting every form of struggle, would always be bound by the most rigid self-imposed discipline of deception and pretence.

'Maybe it's your Indian blood,' said Frank, laughing at her. 'The ancestral suspicion of the white man coming to steal and rape and kill, that you absorbed with your mother's milk.'

'It's not Indian blood,' she retorted proudly and stiffly, putting out her claws; 'it's black blood. And when blacks revolt they don't go in for half-measures. They cut the white boss's throat, and poison his dogs, and vanish into the jungle.'

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Past midnight, yet gusts of warm air were still wafting along the street. Fifty years and four thousand miles lay between this heavy damp heat, this feverish temperature that didn't go down even at night, and the cheering warmth of the stove glowing on the faces in the old lithographs. It was a far cry from the bracing October of the Revolution of that name to this stifling and seemingly endless South American October. A long way from the Lake of Geneva to this city near the Caribbean, where a Swiss citizen was doing his utmost to persuade an old communist cadre (whom ten minutes earlier he hadn't even known) to risk his life yet again so that some other comrades (whom neither of them knew) could have arms and supplies delivered to them up in the *sierra*. This creeping revolution was like a fire with

only a limited time in which either to catch or go out. And the coming offensive – one last spurt of a movement running out of steam – depended on this unknown personage.

‘Supposing the arms don’t arrive?’ objected the thickset figure who had just introduced himself as Lucas.

‘Well anyway, Diego’s there, and he’s got to get through,’ replied Frank, who preferred to give no name.

‘The Church is there too. That doesn’t prove there’s a God.’

‘Don’t worry about the arms. You can leave that to the Front.’

‘Then don’t ask me to help you.’

‘It isn’t me who’s asking. You read my orders, didn’t you?’

‘All the credit goes to the *sierra*, while we do all the dirty work.’

‘Not *all* the dirty work,’ objected Frank, ‘we just need one night of chaos. That’s not much to ask, is it?’

‘Chaos takes a lot of organizing, you know.’

‘Well, but you’ve often done it before.’

‘Yes, but we’ve had enough now.’

‘Who’s “we”? Your boys or you?’

‘Our stores are right down. No more 45s, for one thing – and our Thomsons should be on the scrapheap.’

‘What about those things you make yourselves – the nine-millimetres?’

‘It’s the heavy stuff we need now.’

‘For demolition, perhaps – not just harassment. And the best man for – ’

‘I know, I know. It’s Andrés.’

‘Well, it all comes back to him. Diego’s got to get up there. If we don’t make it this time, either Andrés’ll demobilize the group, or else he’ll break away.’

‘You bastard, you think you can argue us into anything. *Virgen santísima*, you’re a foreigner too. You son of a bitch. . . ’

The hoarse monotonous voice was drowned out by a car

horn, and the car skidded as Lucas crossed the road without waiting for the lights to change. They kept on at a fast pace, even though they weren't going anywhere. Head sunk into his shoulders, Lucas's heavy figure forced its way through the crowd. His squat-nosed, copper-coloured face and the gleaming hair flat against the head could have been an Indian mask. Frank found himself performing feats of ballet to avoid bumping into people, as he tried to keep up with the broad-shouldered old man marching ahead like a guardsman in his borrowed clothes, the checked jacket coming almost to his knees. The clownlike martial figure barely came up to his shoulder, yet Frank got quite out of breath zigzagging along trying to keep pace with him.

The coming of night did nothing to reduce the crowds in the streets. It was a hell of a place for strategic planning. Lucas spoke through clenched teeth, and Frank, catching only about half of his extremely colloquial Spanish, had to fill in the gaps and finish the sentences as best he could. People kept pushing between them; every few yards kids would pester them trying to sell things (kleenex, contraceptives, combs, nail-clippers, dolls in spangled dresses, sets of pornographic photographs); lottery tickets were thrust under their noses as the vendors bawled in their ears. Extended conversation was difficult. Semaphore would have been easier.

'What you want is a diversion, then.'

'No, no. This is a major operation. All the forces blocking the western exit must be got out of the way so Diego can get through.'

'And why us?'

'Because the Lidice Brigade is the best one - or so they say at the top.'

'And why the hurry?'

'If there's no offensive on the guerrilla front we're going to fall apart here. We know the arms are coming.'

'It's time we trusted in our own forces and stopped waiting for Santa Claus – or perhaps you still believe in him?'

'I believed in him when I was a kid, and my shoes were full of presents on Christmas morning. Now I don't believe in him any more – and I don't get the presents either!'

'Anyway, since the stuff won't be coming to the city it won't be any use. As usual.'

'Do you see yourself in Lidice with mortars and bazookas? Unless your aim is fantastic, and you score a direct hit on the President's study –'

'The Yankees have twenty more Presidents where he came from.'

'Too true.'

'Trouble is, we're having to turn down more and more lads – kids coming in from the country. Some of them are even joining the police. We've got to manage to hang on to them somehow.'

'You've not got the weapons for them?'

'Not decent ones, anyway. Or not enough. The Old Man makes all he can, but he's on his own.'

'Why are you telling *me* all this? I'm just passing on orders from the committee.'

'Because I'm talking to you. I never see anyone else. No meetings, no risks – that's the policy.'

'Well, the secretariat know what they're doing.'

This allusion to the higher echelons made them slow their pace; Lucas's complaining became reverently hushed. The idea of 'the Leadership' would always be powerful enough to outlive the last actual leader – because it was thought of with a capital L. Of the fifteen members of the military secretariat, six had been killed and three captured. The remaining six were in six separate hideouts, unable to communicate. With any *barrio* liable to be encircled and searched, identity checks at every corner, and police ordered to shoot at the first sign of resistance, the least

they could do was be cautious. Lucas's regular contact had been killed three days earlier, so Frank had taken over at short notice. He wondered whether Lucas had been as surly as this with his predecessor – or was it just that he knew Frank wasn't in the Party?

There was a cross-street regularly every hundred yards, New York style. At every traffic light a cluster of pedestrians forced them closer together, and they had to stop talking. But they couldn't have chosen a safer way of meeting: they strode along the Avenida Independencia, with its lines of garish hoardings, as though hurrying to an appointment. At that pace, and amid the chattering crowd, even the most sophisticated bug couldn't have picked up more than a word or two. Frank had thought he would do better by getting Lucas into the city-centre; he lived in one of those hillside *ranchos* that have, over the course of years, grown into fully-fledged suburbs, with properly built houses, and real cemented flat roofs where you can dry clothes, hang your hammock on a hot night, and stand a tank to catch the rainwater. But away from his own territory, Lucas wasn't committing himself to anything: he was suspicious and he was wily.

'We've got to get the Old Man to work harder,' thought Frank, as they crossed the road. The Argentinian patriarch never left his cellar, and there he produced one sub-machine-gun per day – a nine-millimetre of unorthodox composition, but proven efficiency. He was a marvel, that man. All he needed was a lathe, a hack-saw and some tail-ends of piping: very economical. But he was a Peronist, and he preferred to give what he made to the Front (who paid him well and called him *Maestro*) rather than to the Communist Party. Hence Lucas's lack of enthusiasm.

'Day after tomorrow would suit us,' said Frank. 'It's urgent.'

'They've been saying things are urgent for the past two years.'

'They say there'll be a curfew at ten for the next few days.'

'That's because of the feast-day – day after tomorrow is All Saints.'

'You taking flowers to the cemetery?'

'There wouldn't be enough flowers.'

'The secretariat want you to do your damndest. All the National Guard in the western sector have got to be put out of action.'

'Do they think they're playing chess? Sending the pawns ahead and keeping the major pieces back?' For the first time Lucas had come back at him with a smile that cut like a whip.

'The local committee of the Front must have had the same instructions.'

'Maybe. But the Party haven't said anything to me. And we're the ones who decide.'

'Since when have the secretariat given you orders without the Party agreeing? You've got delegates on it, haven't you?'

Lucas smiled again, but didn't answer. His brilliantined head was lit up for a moment with a halo of gold from an advertisement for Marlene lingerie. As he walked, his face changed colour in the glow of the neon lights – magenta, turquoise, candy pink, all the shades of a music-hall spotlight. It was eclipsed with black shadow again whenever another pedestrian came between them.

'Up to how late will you be able to maintain contact?'

'*Ave Maria!* That's my business, comrade.'

'Okay. But you must have some plan of action.'

'How long have you been in this country?' This unexpected rudeness didn't really call for any response. But if it represented Lucas's final answer to the question, then good-bye to the operation. Luckily, they had come to another corner.

(If I answer I'll find I've scratched a tough gangster and

offended the sensitive *caballero* underneath. You never know with these bastards – there's a whole El Dorado of gun-carrying gentlemen here in the finest Humphrey Bogart tradition. This one is too proud to admit that he can't read, or has forgotten how if he ever could. Anyway, he hasn't understood my orders. But the machine couldn't grind on at all if it weren't for Lucas and his kind, the ordinary middle cadres. Where would we be without them? But what can we expect from them if they have nothing to give? Everything definitely depends on the four tons of hardware the Italian's promised us. Everything? Well, hardly the fate of the world. Just a combined city-sierra insurrection to short-circuit the coming farce of the election – and D-day will be in a few months' time at the most. In other words, the immediate future of this country of ten million souls, with its wealth untold as one of the world's biggest oil exporters. And, indirectly, the destiny of the continent. If we could give birth to a baby sister for the Cuban revolution, if we could rescue this sodden jungle of a Kuwait from the geographic accident that binds it to Washington, we might in the end manage to asphyxiate the Empire by garrotting its oil-ducts.)

They walked on side by side, with nothing more to say to one another, the silence between them a lead weight. Lucas, sniffing, was determined to ignore him. They came into an oval plaza. On the eight-lane avenue the cars looked like so many matchboxes – yellow, blue, emerald-green. A vast sign flashed on and off at either side: CERVEZA SUPERIOR, said one, the best beer, in blue and white; opposite it, above the thirty-foot-high face of a 1950 Hollywood pin-up (red hair, white teeth, green eyes) glowed the words CREOLE PETROLEUM. Frank suddenly felt his skin tingle – Lucas had stopped to light a cigarette, and was watching him.

'Of course I don't expect you to tell me your plans,' he said, 'but I'm one more man for you. I've got a Star and

two magazines. There's a shortage of everything, after all.'

Lucas blew his smoke upwards, and burst into a guffaw which tailed off into a fit of coughing. 'It's not much, but we'll give you something better,' he said, as he cleared his throat.

'The cacique of Lidice,' thought Frank; 'he has his ridiculous side.' It was a bit disappointing.

'See that corner over there? Independencia and Miguel Enríquez. Nine p.m., day after tomorrow. My mate'll be waiting for you.'

'Password?'

'Don't need one. He's been watching you for the past half hour. See you!'

Frank turned. Fifty yards away he spotted a little fellow in a peaked baseball cap, with an American jacket and tennis shoes, leaning against a parked Mercedes, his eyes fixed on them.

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Celia was out. She was, Frank knew, meeting Rossi. It was a Party assignment, but as he lay alone in bed, half dreaming, half daydreaming, he could see in all its details the seduction scene that was undoubtedly being played out in the glossy country club. See it, and hear it: there is no panting, no gasping, no moaning so intense as fills the silence around a lonely lover. A car-horn outside suddenly made him start. Still caught up in his dream and heavy with sleep, he rolled over, knocking the wall as he did so. A flake of yellow paint came down, uncovering a bit more of the paper below – a dreary checkerboard of shepherdesses, swings and Swiss chalets, repeated ad infinitum. Four a.m. Would women come home at a reasonable time at night *after* the Revolution?

Frank switched on the light and went over to the wardrobe. It was as he feared: three dresses hung there, but not

the blue silk. A sleeveless shift, only covering one shoulder, it was more like a sarong than an evening dress; it would have done for the beach, except for the material – smooth, slinky, clinging stuff, textured like skin. A whore's dress.

Mosquitoes dived around him, and moths fluttered with a wild whirring of wings. Frank felt an uncontrollable sense of revulsion. The only place in this ground-floor flat where there was a breath of air was the glazed entrance-way in from the street, with its dull scratched glass panels. All their flats had always had the same shabby, uninhabited look. Still, they were lucky to have it to themselves – luckier than a lot of other couples in the underground, who had to live packed like sardines in temporary lodging houses. One had to move every two months or so, always on the run from one room to another; always ready to clear out at a moment's notice leaving no trace; barely even a chance to unpack. Frank had had to master the difficult art of preventing life's alluvial deposit collecting unnoticed in the bottoms of pockets, the backs of drawers, on top of bookshelves, under beds: old newspapers, hairpins, telephone numbers or other jottings, even cigarette-ends. There is a whole detritus of seemingly neutral odds and ends that is just as recognizable as the peculiar smell a person imparts to the place he has slept in. Like burglars in their own homes, they must leave no clues.

For Celia, whose one obsession was cleanliness, this scrupulous security was never a constraint – merely a subsection of household hygiene. A transient's life suited her down to the ground. She could happily have slept under a different bridge every night, as long as there was somewhere clean with a water supply for her two daily showers. It was Frank who found it hard not to form habits, hard to grasp that his European attachment to mess and his disorderly Bohemian ways were the revolutionary's worst enemy. Even though, leaping like a flea from one resting-place to the next, he learnt to hang on to no more than his

notes and a few books, he still had trouble shaking off a shamefaced nostalgia for his cosy little world of old, his soft warm cocoon. He liked his books, the notes of appointments pinned to the wall, the overflowing ashtrays, the little round oases of light. He could identify any book on his shelves at once simply by its smell and feel; he could spend whole days dreaming at his familiar trestle table with his writer's stock-in-trade spread round him – pipes and tobacco jar, coloured pencils, paper-knife, fountain pens.

'The first thing you've got to get rid of from your bourgeois life is feeling you need a home,' Celia had said repeatedly in the early days. And she was right. If you never form a shell, you'll never turn into a snail.

In the long sticky months he had recently spent in Ciudad Grande, depression had clarified his mind. Ciudad Grande, despite its name, was an out-of-the-way, overgrown village beside a lagoon dazzling in the sun ('one of the largest rivers in the world,' his landlord continually reminded him from the hammock in which he lay, himself patently unconvinced of the fact). It was a river port, near enough both to the sea and to Brazil to facilitate the smuggling of arms, and other things. The Front had sent him there to set up a business cover – really, he thought, to test him. From noon to dusk, all the inhabitants drifted into a glassy-eyed inertia known as a siesta, from which one arose with a mouth like cardboard, legs like lead, and a non-functioning brain. He had never got used to the hammock part, but on returning to the capital, despite the less extreme heat, there was something in him that looked forward from the very beginning of the day to the twilight and the sense of deliverance it represented: a cool shower, a clean shirt, a cold refreshing beer. He only recovered from his state of heat-induced disintegration and became almost himself again at around eight in the evening. And indeed, most delicate operations (apart from a few kid-

nappings and bank raids) took place at night-time. Frank left the business of the daylight hours to those who could cope with the zany blindman's buff of miscalculations and lucky surprises known as 'political work': the battle quite different from the plan of campaign, the building never remotely like the original blueprint. He spent his own day trying to cure himself of ever expecting things to go according to plan, trying to be ready for the unforeseen that would inevitably occur. Staying quietly at home, he filled notebook after notebook with his wild thoughts. If only the thermometer would go down low enough in the evening, he might get his ideas into some kind of shape.

But this was night-time, and alone in the empty flat, unable to sleep, he saw a flashing succession of erotic scenes, the B-film of his own obsession. He saw the bastard Rossi – a bastard, but they needed him – grabbing at Celia's breasts and whispering obscenities into her ear. And he saw her with her legs parted, reaching for his prick to speed things up.

'I've got no time for men who play chivalrous any more than women who play coy,' she had remarked one day – in the same neutral voice in which she might have asked him to pass the salt, the voice she used for everything. 'But some men go limp if you use your hands,' she added, dispelling his last remaining doubts.

Were Rossi's services really as valuable as all that? He'd like to get a look at the man's ugly face, for, long as he had been dealing with him, it had always been through other people, both here and in Geneva. Perhaps, he thought with distaste, they would meet through Celia –

'What are you doing with my bra? Have you been going through my things again?'

The front door banged shut. Frank thrashed about with his arms and legs – it always took him a while to wake up. Celia had to repeat her question, and he suddenly realized that he had gone to sleep holding her bra in his hands like

a rag doll. What a fool he must look. But all's fair in love and war: there was certainly no need to feel guilty. There isn't much choice – kill or be killed, *vencer o morir*.

'I must have fallen asleep waiting for you,' he mumbled. 'Is it late?'

Through the grimy windows of the entrance-way it was beginning to be light.

'Does it matter? Have you been back a long time?'

Celia always answered one question with another. He hardly noticed any more. But this time she had that mocking look of innocence compounded with artfulness that was a sure indication that she was going to tell him lies. It was instantly recognizable, that smile, almost an agreed signal between them, part of Celia's etiquette for deceit.

'Did you see the Italian?'

'Yes, I dropped in for a while. There was a party going on. A lot of top people – journalists and architects and diplomats. Carlet was there – the Frenchman. I'm afraid I got rather tight.'

'What did they all have to say?'

'Oh, they were talking about the elections, and the guerillas. Everyone's talking about the insurrection but no one really believes in it. Rossi was highly correct. He didn't say a word.'

She took off her clothes and went into the bathroom. Frank rolled over and turned his face to the Swiss chalets on the wall; he didn't want to see what Rossi must have seen.

'Did you have sex with him?'

'What difference does it make? Anyway, I didn't feel like it.' She was lying, but it was a social lie: she knew he knew. 'What have *you* been doing since yesterday?'

'Nothing much. I went to the cinema – one of those terrible spectacles. Dubbed too.' Still the social game: he knew she knew.

'Did you know' (her tone changed) 'Armando had asked me to call in and give him another morphine injection made him feel a bit better. He wants to see you.'

'Where?'

'I'm taking you there the day after tomorrow.' The next few words were drowned by the noise of the shower, and he missed them.

Perhaps it's true. I can always check with Armando. Anyway, I don't care. I don't care what happens in Lidice tomorrow either. *Mañana*. To hell with *mañana* – all the *mañanas*. Will Diego get through to the guerrillas? Will Rossi keep his word? Plans, programmes, manifestos; orders no one obeys, convocations no one comes to, litanies no one hears. The magic of the idol of revolution is wearing thin. Does the oligarchy wear a golfing cap or a bowler? What colour is imperialism? Is reformism round or square? Come on now, I want an answer! Oh yes, I know, one day the Internationale will unite the whole human race, and not just the heroes like it used to, Lenin and his Fatherland below, and Our-Father-who-art-in-heaven above. Dearly beloved brethren, fellow materialists, we're walking on the water too, just like Jesus did – but he had a life-jacket, and a steel rope attaching him to his Daddy's helicopter up there behind the clouds. Oh, if only we could touch and smell, and see the things we talk about! Men and women. My woman. You. My lifebuoy. My rope-ladder. My untamed love, fill my mouth with the bitter iodine taste of seaweed, and we'll swim together up to the source, the fountainhead; let's do it now, this minute – don't make promises, don't say we'll do it tomorrow. No tomorrows. No delays. Come to me now. You're my sea, and what a rich catch of fish is there. You're my luminous shadow in the night, my other hands, my final breath, life of my life –

The shower stopped.

'What's that?'

He'd been talking aloud without realizing it, louder and louder in fact, thinking he was alone, or inaudible through the running water.

'A hymn to Celia, an epithalamium freely improvised in the style of the "Elegy to Egeria" – do you know it? Just my way of filling in time till the arms arrive. Blank verse. Nothing important. Just thinking aloud. You'd better come to bed, your feet'll get cold.'

She'd drawn back the shower-curtain and half opened the door. Now she was drying herself with the towel. Like a cat she yawned and stretched; she seemed still to be dancing, in the metallic fluorescent light. In the mirror above the wash-basin Frank saw a picture of creamy skin surrounded by a nimbus of white steam. The picture vanished as she put out the light. She slipped between the sheets and lay against him, her breath on his neck.

She *was* a bit cold

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Lidice. Like a password tapped out on wall after wall. Like a ghostly hand going from house to house snuffing out the candles. The glow of a candle or storm lantern shone for a moment behind the slats of the wooden shutters, went out, and then reappeared in the next window. In every one it meant time to pick up mattresses and carry sleeping children into the courtyard at the back, as far from the street as possible. One after another the house-fronts went black again. Did they hope to conjure away stray bullets? Superstition was still far from dead here. But darkness doesn't discourage lead as it does mosquitoes or fireflies. The only light left was the flickering sanctuary lamp in the little church, throwing a rosy glow on the white glass of the leaded windows, drawing a pink line under the closed doors.

The hillside merged into the mountains behind, and the

mountains into the sky. Half an hour earlier, the six men in the security group had taken over the local generating station, and disconnected the transformer. They hadn't even had to draw their guns. Cutting off the electricity – which puts out the streetlamps on the main roads as well as darkening the tenement windows – is the ritual introit. This festival of death followed the established pattern. First, a great mass of leaflets signed by the Liberation Front were shot into the air, and blown round by the wind like so much confetti. Crowds gathered, speeches were made on street corners, an impromptu meeting was held in the square with a single speaker, not a local man. Then banners and flags were hung from trees, and two or three slogans painted on the road surface: 'Death to the Puppet' – 'Vote with a Gun' – 'General Strike'. Ten minutes later, three city police patrol cars appeared together at the foot of the avenue, and set off up the central thoroughfare of the *barrio*. Finding it blocked, they had to turn off into a maze of back streets. At precisely eight minutes past ten, the leading car was stopped by a grenade, and the rear car was cut off from behind by a small van. Two policemen got out of the first car, their faces bleeding, their hands in the air. The others let themselves be captured unresistingly by two youths waiting near by, their faces hidden by balaclavas; they took them back down the hill, and left them outside their own headquarters. Lucas said he didn't need hostages – a dubious piece of magnanimity, since the Ladice Brigade had nowhere to put them, and they weren't worth a peso's ransom anyway! A routine operation, in short. A sequence rehearsed ten times over. Hardly more to it than a list of credits. Lucas's talents as a director need not be stretched very far.

From the rooftop where they had posted him before ten o'clock, Frank could look down on the sloping rectangular square which marked the centre of this village within a city. In the centre a children's playground, just a space

without any lawns or paths, separated from the road by a three-foot fence. On three sides a continuous line of rough-cast single-storey houses, every colour from pistachio to deep red, their doors giving directly onto what passed as a pavement. Opposite, behind a thin screen of eucalyptus trees, a disused warehouse, the neighbourhood school and a grubby, brick-built church formed a single line of wall, the outline of its top irregular against the sky. To prevent accidents, what with thin walls and amateur marksmen, Lucas had posted snipers on only two sides, at right angles. The soldiers, not properly trained for street fighting, had light automatic weapons (the famous Belgian FALs) and unlimited ammunition; they kept firing off volleys into the darkness to keep up their courage. Despite streams of oaths from their officers. The weapons seemed to go off spontaneously. From the rebels, the two or three veterans who could see like cats in the dark to whom Lucas had entrusted the last of his available automatic weapons, the firing came in short, careful bursts, barrels never raised above the line of fire, barely a cartridge wasted.

The island of darkness was by now completely surrounded. But what were they waiting for? What were they preparing to do down there? Attack a fortress? Or did they hope to arrest all the officers of the Front? Judging from the sounds of activity that had kept everyone on tenterhooks for over an hour, preparations for the siege must be nearly complete. After a few sporadic shots – really, no one knew who was firing on whom any more – the police had moved out and the National Guard had taken over, arriving in force with special units and heavy armour to take up positions all round the area. They were encircled by a cordon of nerve-racking noises, just too far to hear clearly, which the snipers, their ears pricked, tried to interpret in terms of how many men were there, what they were doing, what manoeuvres they were planning. Sirens, tyres screeching, the crunching of tank-tracks, car-horns,

radio messages, brief orders, swearing, counter-orders bellowed over walkie-talkies: all so many ear-teasing sounds coming up in sudden waves from the valley below. Frank, straining to hear with the rest, tried in vain to puzzle them out: his own future taunting him from only a voice-length away.

A sudden movement, and then a touch, made him jump. He swung round, his hand gripping his gun: it was Milo, Lucas's link-man and bodyguard, the smiling-eyed mulatto who had brought him here, who had leapt noiselessly onto the rooftop, his tennis shoes darkened with black shoe-polish. The thoughtful Lucas had sent him to give Frank the latest news: 'Every way out of the *barrio* is blocked; there are machine-guns posted on the avenue. The National Guard have mobilized a whole battalion. They haven't brought in all their reserves yet, because they're afraid trouble may break out in the other *ranchos* too – but they *have* called in the men from the road-blocks on the Pan-American highway, and the whole of the western zone's in a state of panic. They're censoring the radio and television, so no news is going out, and they've got police cordons to keep out reporters.' Milo could hardly have been more excited over a baseball league final. He said his piece, and rushed off without waiting for an answer. Off to second base. Well, off to Lucas's tactical headquarters, in a house a little behind the lines. 'I wish they'd put me with one of the mobile groups,' thought Frank, 'instead of sticking me here in the royal box to wait till the time comes for delaying action.'

Minutes later, Frank was face to face with danger, a palpable danger far less terrifying than the deadweight of being alone in the dark. Figures loomed up in the blackness, an enemy took shape. At last – an enemy other than himself. An armoured car came rumbling into the square, followed by three army lorries without lights. The men followed on foot, Indian file. The lorries stopped at the

corner of the main road, at the top of the slope, leaving the armoured car down at the bottom of the square; their rear thus covered, the foot-soldiers moved lightly along the left-hand side of the square, slipping past the empty buildings. One by one, bent almost double to be as small as possible, they ran forward. It looked as though their aim was to occupy the highest points and then fan outwards, cutting off the snipers' retreat to the *sierra*, and forcing them back towards the city below, where troops were now lined up to bar the way and give them a warm reception. ('It's lucky they think we're such fools.') Every few moments another cautious silhouette appeared out of nothing, to vanish again behind a tree trunk, into a doorway, or flat against the ground. Irregular shadows, scanning the rooftops, fingers on triggers, crouching on their heels or crawling on their stomachs; from time to time the moonlight caught the sharp edge of a helmet, the end of a boot, the barrel of a gun, standing out against the rough-cast wall. The clinking of their water-bottles against their belts, and their panting as they ran, gave their positions away, near enough to strike, only a breath away.

Suddenly, a magnesium flare shot up from a near-by rooftop. Nothing happened. Silence. The square seemed empty.

'Piss off, you old fool - you'll get shot.' The drill-sergeant's bellow rang out. Frank flattened himself against the wall. Who was he shouting at?

'Let me through please sir, please, officer. I'll only be a minute.' The high-pitched quavering voice came from an old man, late seventies perhaps: 'Only a minute, just a minute -'

Frank almost laughed aloud: the poor man clearly had no idea what was happening. He risked a quick look over the parapet: the old man was ~~pattering~~ ^{padding} along the square, in white trousers ridiculously too big for him, carrying a jerrycan in his left hand, and waving his right arm with determination.

'Let me pass, let me pass! I came down for some water. I can't see a thing.' He lurched blindly – he could have been drunk. 'Can you help me home? I can't see.'

Uncontrollable laughter from the gunsights; snorts here and there all round the rooftops. It was so ludicrous and so totally unexpected – just too much when all their nerves were at breaking point. Was he being intentionally funny?

'Shut up and go home – get a move on!' It was the same brassy voice from the sergeant; then, presumably to the crew of the armoured car, 'Let him through down there!'

'... there ... there,' came the long drawn out echo from the hillside. Then total silence once more.

None of them could have been over twenty-five. As soon as it was light, all the young men found in the area would be picked up, searched, and sent off for investigation; all suspects would be given a paraffin test. They must keep the soldiers engaged for as long as possible, and then get out of the way by daybreak.

Suddenly a searchlight shone. For a second, Frank's forearm showed up against the parapet in front of him, then it disappeared again. The pencil of light from the armoured car at the far end of the square moved up along cornices and rooftops, feeling its way like the antenna of some insect. The heavy machine-gun (it sounded like a .50 calibre) trained on the path of the searchlight, followed it round with short bursts of fire, the gun-barrel flashing with each burst. A shower of stones came down above Frank's head, falling on his neck and back. The searchlight went on its way, leading the gunfire higher up. In the darkness and silence its pounding sounded heavy and majestic, but each burst of fire ended on a sharp, almost comic note, as the last cartridge case fell with a clink on the ground. Suddenly the jet of white light threw up against the sky a great geometric structure of glass and steel, a hospital perhaps, that had been up to then invisible in the darkness. It made Frank shiver to see this huge multi-

storey building materialize above him like that, even though it was on the far side of the valley, on the hill opposite. 'If they position their searchlight on that, they'll be able to pick us off like clay pigeons. I only hope Lucas realizes that.' The ground was too rough and the hills too close for helicopters to risk night flying – which was a bit of luck. Each time it passed over the front of the building, the searchlight covered its shiny black façade with spangles of light that seemed to linger after it had moved on.

Silence again. Falling like an incoming tide over the roofs, pushing the noise of the firing down into the ground. More dangerous than any flare. It made the sky so huge and smooth and empty that Frank's head began to swim. With the stars vibrating in his ears, his pulse beating so loudly against the organ-rumble in the background that it rocked his entire body, his frame suddenly hollow and resounding like a tunnel, Frank felt as if he were – horribly – drunk.

But luckily there were the dogs. Drowning out the echo of the silence; ready to do their bit when the general cacophony started again; barking to one another from hill to hill, taking up where the gunfire left off. Every night the whole city became a kind of vast, mad kennel-yard. Invisible by day, the dogs (like their human brethren, the down-and-outs) got their own back at night on all the well-coiffeured poodles and bassets with rhinestone collars, the cossetted pets of the rich. Or perhaps they were just vocalizing their fear of the hyenas that came down from the *sierra* to scavenge among the rubbish tips. It seemed as though the night itself was barking, casting up all its devils from below ground, those multitudes of clamorous spectres that materialized at dusk and vanished again into nothingness at daybreak.

And there were the women, wailing as they groped in the darkness for the bodies of the wounded fallen by their doors. Comfortingly, all round him, the first cries of

mourning peopled the gloom with quasi-human presences. A fugue of hatreds: the barking dogs, the gunfire, the keening of the old. The crackling of sniper-fire and the thunderous rattling of the machine-guns paused only to give way to the background noises of suffering and fear from all round the city, the raucous but muffled Indian sounds that formed an accompaniment to the fighting. Inarticulate sounds with no identifiable notes, made by no one and addressed to no one in particular – yet a language all the same. All the honeyed speeches of the polite politicians explaining the inexplicable, all the harangues and confabulations had departed with the daylight; the tide going down at night always uncovers the un-polite underside of the official statements, the sand crunching with pain.

No, they were not alone at their posts. The people of Lidice were on their side, even in their muted wailing, with the same whispering complicity that caused the streets to empty within minutes of the attack on the police car, even though no warning had been given, no orders received. With a crazy sense of invulnerability, as though protected by Providence, Frank gazed down on the commercial Babylon spread out below him – a lake of mist with steep banks of shadow, the mauve streaks of the motorways, the greenish islands of purchasable pleasure: neon-lit sex shops, inviting window-displays, night-clubs. How infinitely preferable was the hum of the prayers he heard, or thought he heard, coming from the poor houses round the square (and the prayers were real enough, even if the hum was an illusion). He, the invulnerable, kept watch over the corrugated iron roofs, the noisy kitchen-living-rooms where grandmothers, wives and sisters sat stiffly on their chairs, with folded arms, gaze riveted as though hypnotized upon the cheap madonna hanging beside the fridge. How many would find themselves widows in the morning? In this operation all the fighters were within earshot of

their relatives, up on the roof, or near the house: they were all local men. The only foreigner (not just from out of town, like some of these soldiers now moving in on them) was himself. The lads of the Front's local brigade were defending the places they had played in as kids: what Frank was defending was a utopia his supposedly adult self believed in.

He cautiously stretched out his arm against the moonlight. The cement was smooth – another bit of luck. By the luminous hands of his watch it was not yet midnight. He had to hold on for another hour, come what might.

At last. A shot broadside into the armoured car: one, two, three, four, in regular rhythm, and the searchlight went out with a sizzle like a giant frying-pan. So their one M2 carbine, the pride and joy of the depot, had been of some use! The performance was greeted with several whistles. If only they'd had a bazooka, they'd have got the armoured car itself.

With the return of darkness, the tension relaxed. There were sighs of relief. Backs were straightened. With this sudden respite, people even dared to speak again, though in low voices. An officer, calling out a command in code, got his men together again – non-professionals like these would treat the briefest pause in the fighting as a truce. With its gun-turret closed, the armoured car reversed with a roar of its powerful engine; the lorries put on their side-lights, and one after another started to move. An ambulance swept past them, blue lights flashing – presumably for the policemen from the radio-cars who had not yet been taken away. Shadowy silhouettes could be seen in all directions, blindly bumping into one another amid a clattering of hardware – as machine-gun stands were dragged along the ground, magazines re-charged, breeches opened and shut. Frank took advantage of the noise to shift his position, working his way along to the opposite corner of his roof with his elbows. To hear all these civili-

ans in battle-dress carrying on – arguing, swearing and complaining, and generally behaving as though the street were their own barrack yard – one would think all the snipers had vanished and the enemy was in complete control. Whatever happened they must not make their presence known; they wouldn't even communicate by walkie-talkie. The urban militia fighters could move at lightning speed, by back-streets, rooftops, courtyards, tunnels, stairways and gullies. But their territory had become considerably reduced over the course of several months' sporadic and indecisive skirmishing. The enemy had space, numbers, weaponry and ammunition on their side. And, far from making them safer, the fact that the rebels were on home ground actually meant greater losses. Six months earlier they had been operating in some ten neighbouring *barrios* like this one – now it was no more than three or four. The rest had succumbed to the same relentless pattern, the few but irreplaceable losses, the police-searches in the small hours, the torturing in the interrogation centres, and finally the army in permanent occupation. When occupying forces are foreign, they can always go home to their own country, but an army occupying its own country cannot be driven out: it can only be destroyed. All or nothing. For the loser, a civil war is a one-way trip.

To defend himself, Frank had his Star revolver with two magazines, two grenades, and two legs he could run away on. Lucas had posted him here, with orders to stay where he was, and use his grenades at the last possible minute to back up the fighters when they needed him most, at the point when they would rise up from below like jack-in-the-boxes to attack the enemy from behind. He and his unknown comrade posted near by were to lie there, playing dead, and let the soldiers past. They were the silent pivots on which a complicated manoeuvre depended: the troops must be made to think they had overwhelmed the rebels, and be led to scatter till they finally started attacking one

another: they'd be shooting it out for a good fifteen minutes before discovering their mistake. Long enough for the guerrillas to reach their meeting point behind the lines, in the ravine between this *barrio* and the next; long enough for them to check on their numbers and ammunition, and for the wounded to pass their weapons on to others. Every weapon had a history. There wasn't one that hadn't been taken from the enemy – revolvers from the traffic police, and the rest from motorized patrols of political police. Lucas trained his subordinates to take pride in capturing them, but never to treat them as individual trophies: whatever arms were captured he put all together, and they belonged officially to the group. No one had a gun of his own at home; they didn't even get used to using a particular model. And only three people knew exactly where the depot was.

Then, in single file, they would slip along the springy surface of the river-bed, a rich mixture of rubbish and rotting leaves. At night and when it was dry, the gully was concealed by an arch of vegetation – tamarind trees, orange trees and brambles. The bottom of this invisible crevasse was wider than the top, and the comrades would move along it, in the opposite direction from the way the military columns were moving, till they got to the wide avenue at the bottom of the *barrio*; then they would come up from behind in threes and fours. Only then were Frank and the others waiting individually at their posts to open fire, catching the troops in a pincer-grip, to harass and demoralize them, and make them think fresh reinforcements of 'terrorists' had arrived in some mysterious way from other *barrios*.

'Since you're getting us to carry out a diversionary manoeuvre,' Lucas had said a few hours earlier, 'you might as well help create a diversion for us. At least you'll have the advantage of knowing what it's all about – my boys have no idea what it's in aid of.' And he handed him two

little cylindrical black cardboard boxes fastened with yellow tape: the compliment was a veiled challenge. They were left over from a raid on the naval arsenal by the harbour: 'There were four cases full. I kept one for ourselves – as a souvenir. You'll be the first to deliver them. They're supposed to be good – no noise and plenty of effect. Good luck!'

Frank could almost smell the orange-flowers in the distance, like a signal sent up from the men down there, moving along the dried-up river-bed, their espadrilles making only the faintest crackling on the leaves and snapping branches. He felt a thrill of fear.

A single shot rang out – presumably accidental – from a neighbouring rooftop. It must have been Frank's opposite number, also there to cover the retreat of the men from the gully – there were only two of them up above the square. A shadow in a helmet ran up the church steps and disappeared into the doorway. Another ran across the square and crouched against the wall below him, only ten yards away. It started to fire on the invisible sniper further up, either not seeing Frank, or disregarding him. Frank knelt behind the parapet, and, leaning forward slightly, was struck by the child's face of the soldier, blazing away with his FAL at his hip, not taking aim at all. The ridged edge of his trigger tickled Frank's index-finger. He cocked it in slow motion, fearful that the click would give him away, released the safety-catch, and grasping the gun in both hands leant on the edge of the parapet to take better aim at the crouching boy. He fired from above and behind, almost point-blank. His first thought was, 'I'm a murderer.' The boy fell to the ground. He went on firing, not counting the shots, till the trigger failed to respond. Quickly he moved back, took out the empty magazine, flung it to the ground and inserted the second one. By now he had been seen: they were starting to shoot at him.

All Frank wanted was to get away. to go home, to sleep.

To climb over to the next roof, and crawl away to hide in the bushes till it was daylight. Then he could slip out and become one of the early-morning queue waiting for the bus to take them to work – their work, that is to say. After all, passing unnoticed was his business, his speciality. He'd paid what he owed, he'd done what was expected of him. Lucas couldn't complain: the only reason he had been spotted too soon was because that stupid bastard had let his gun go off. And there was a company of crack troops not thirty yards away, who'd have been only too pleased to have him for a target, unimportant as he was.

He was about to make his escape when the shooting suddenly started up again from below. They were out of the gully at last! He found himself sweating like a man caught with his hand in the till. He felt as though someone was looking at him from behind, but when he turned there was no one there. Who knew: perhaps she was watching him from one of those darkened windows, or perching somewhere on that great steel and glass edifice opposite from which he was so visible. Condescending, mocking, silent as always. What would she think? 'Your manoeuvre wasn't very brilliant.' Suddenly Frank's eyes fell on the beautiful fruit that lay beside him with their lead centres and rough skins, the two little olive-green pineapples with their orange bands: Lucas's hand-grenades. He had forgotten all about them! He was filled with childish delight, with a need to fidget, and shout, and make a noise. He did his best to restrain the delicious impulse to move his arms and legs, but he couldn't: he took hold of a grenade, and pulled the pin before he had even thought what to do with it. It was too late to think now, he had no choice; but luckily enough, at the very moment, a squad of soldiers came to set up a machine-gun, just where the boy he had shot lay. They were clearly silhouetted, having turned half-right to answer the fire coming from below. The shield of the pin rested against the hollow of his palm, and he

sensed its pressure with an inward exaltation, indulging in a luxury of suspense, like an actor on the stage who knows that the woman he loves is somewhere in the audience. This was it. He hesitated a moment longer, but somewhere quite close he felt the shadowy presence of that face whose mocking eyes never left him. Counting three, he sprang up, and then slowly, as though putting the shot on sports day, spun round with his arm bent back. He almost lost his balance and went head first over the parapet, but saving himself, he rolled over backwards. 'God, I hope it doesn't kill anyone,' he thought in that split second. The noise was ear-splitting, drowning out the uneven rattling of the guns. In the momentary silence, before the stupefied soldiers on the other side of the square began firing even more rapidly, moaning could be heard amid the booming vibrations of the ground and the walls. Face down on the cement roof, Frank saw nothing. But his exaltation was gone, blown to bits like everything else.

Vainly he peered into the darkness behind him. The face had vanished, with its penetrating eyes, leaving him feeling empty and a bit sick. What was the point of killing or dying if she wasn't there to see? No witnesses, no accomplices, just those anonymous indifferent bodies of men he didn't even hate, lying smashed to bits on a deserted stage. He barely noticed the firing start up again. He slipped his revolver into his belt, the magazine still full, picked up the second grenade, and made his way down to the high, narrow courtyard where Lucas waited expressionless among a jumble of clothes-lines and rusted toys. Without a word he handed him the grenade. He wrapped his revolver in a plastic bag and pushed it down among some rubbish where he could find it later.

'Two dead and three wounded, so far,' said Lucas simply. But Frank didn't dare ask questions - or even look him in the face. 'Diego's van got through,' he added. 'They've just phoned from San Felipe.'

The words no longer interested Frank. Lucas seemed to be talking to him through a pane of glass. But he did utter a mechanical I-told-you-so: 'So you see, there *is* a Santa Claus after all,' he said, before vanishing into the bushes on the hillside.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Will I ever be able to confess to Celia or Armando that it was in Rome, in fact in St Peter's, that I first committed myself irrevocably to the Revolution? My first guerrilla uniform was the white cassock of the Petits Chanteurs à la Croix de Bois. I was just eleven when I vowed to become a terrorist. I was actually singing the *Veni Creator* before the Sovereign Pontiff – or rather behind him, for his Holiness was officiating at the high altar, and had rudely turned his back on us. The whole thing was settled during that mass. What, otherwise, would I have thought of Armando, when I met him ten years later in Geneva? As what he was, I suppose: one of several people who made up the Party's international commission, a travelling salesman for an improbable revolution with an ill-defined programme and precious little in the way of organization. I was a keen young history graduate at the time, labouring away over the archives of the Third International, or as much as had survived of them in the libraries of Paris, Amsterdam and Lausanne. It was not just that he represented a flesh and blood specimen of a vanished species, whose skeleton I, a lazy palaeontologist, was trying to reconstruct on paper – the race of Zinoviev, Radek, Borodin, and the subject of my never-to-be-written thesis, Bela Kun. It was not just that he had arrived in the Old World from the New – from America to Europe was merely a change of place. No, he had come down, or up, from the *other* world, the *real* world, that secret, closed world (up in the clouds, or in some subterranean vault, I didn't know

where) from which I had always felt so painfully excluded.

He was right out of my class. He was the delegate, the commissar. He represented the Centre. I had known all about that Centre from my childhood, since that time in Rome to be precise. I'd always had not so much an idea as a picture of it in my mind; long before I became acquainted with the labyrinths of the Comintern and the long list of conditions of admittance to them; long before I made the sad discovery that the stairs of the famous Hotel Lux in Moscow smelt of burnt fat and cabbage, and that people shivered round its wood-stoves, eagerly reading ancient foreign papers, out-of-date messages, and SOSs from comrades long since vanished. Even if I could have forgotten my sense of dazed terror when faced with the colonnades and the massive Berninis, the purples, the domes, the canopies and the marbles of the capital of Christianity (not to mention the Swiss guards with their gorgeous uniforms and halberds, far from being ridiculous, they almost made me proud of being Swiss myself) my Uncle Charles would have set me right again pretty smartly a few years later. He felt it his duty when the appropriate time came, on the threshold of my adult life, to put me on my guard against the perils of the modern world. He solemnly handed me a little booklet denouncing in no uncertain terms all the workings of the terrible international conspiracy of Judaeo-Bolshevism. If the poor fellow had wanted to convert me to world communism he couldn't have gone a better way about it: the tentacles of that hideous octopus, snaking into every corner of the globe, were supposed to lead relentlessly to a Centre, a Head, some fantastic Moscow more glorious than any high priest's court or Ali Baba's cave – and one day, I swore, I would get there. The spectre that had haunted Europe for a century, terrifying all the right-wing politicians and my Uncle Charles, came to figure in my life as a kind of unknown fairy godmother. No wandering

ghost ever had a warmer welcome. It curled up comfortably in my adolescent mind in the place of honour only just vacated by my happiest childhood memories.

Armando was no surprise to me, therefore: I'd been expecting him all my life. The more mysterious he became, the better I understood him. He did not, of course, ever actually show me the orders written in violet ink on a piece of material sewn into the lining of his waistcoat; but everything about him confirmed the fact that he was a Delegate – the brevity of his visits to Geneva, the secrecy surrounding his travels, the misleading banality of everything he said. After all, there was nothing mythical about his functions. He'd been introduced to me by comrades from the Algerian FLN, the same people I'd helped a few years before when they were in trouble from the OAS and the French police. He was one of the few people who knew where Che Guevara had gone when he left Cuba, and had kept in touch with him. He was always on the move – from Algiers to Moscow, Havana to Cairo, Dar-es-Salaam to Peking, Hanoi to Damascus – often with Ben Barka, with whom he collaborated in preparations for the Tricontinental Conference. He and I spent a lot of time together, and as we talked a certain confidence developed between us; then he began to let slip remarks which, for all his caution, all that he left unsaid, all the usual red herrings, made clear to me, among other things, the unsuspected gravity of the Sino-Soviet dispute, the problems involved in getting supplies to Vietnam, and the unexpected attitude of the Cubans (with whom he in fact sympathized) to the Communist Parties of Latin America. It was like so many meteorites landing in my back yard from the firmament where comets like Armando came into being, beneath which we ordinary militants worked away at ground level, tools to be manipulated by the great minds who directed the ebb and flow of world revolution. In those days I did not realize that the only respect in which the

professional is indubitably superior to the amateur, the only thing that sets the 'secret agent' apart from the ordinary newspaper reader, is that he knows the headlines a few days ahead of time. Secret information is simply tomorrow's news: for a long time I believed it to be different news altogether, written in ink forever invisible.

The Pope – Goldfinger – the Comintern: it was all one war! And Armando was my link with it. My image of the Holy of Holies he came from was a marvellous combination of the dim religious lithograph and the second-rate spy film – a vast underground Centre with the majesty of a topsy-turvy St Peter's and the functional austerity of a streamlined modern bunker. In the middle I saw a vast circular hall, its walls lined with maps covered in warning lights, a huge screen for live television transmission, so that the movements and activities of agents in Stanleyville, Buenos Aires, Manila, Singapore, Madrid and elsewhere could be followed simultancously, and inter-continental telephones to convey instructions to anywhere within the hour. There, amid the discreet crackling of the long-distance lines, I saw half-a-dozen shaven-headed high priests at an electronic keyboard. Before them a master-plan of operations, a great translucent map of the world like an aquarium. Pale from worry and sleeplessness, their shirts unbuttoned, drawing nervously on gold-tipped Turkish cigarettes, shattered with exhaustion, these beings whose ages, whose names, even whose nationalities no one knew (for they could express themselves with equal ease in English, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese or French) sat there controlling from afar the surging and re-surfing of the international class struggle. They could see the entire world without being seen. In all the films, such people have a rather unpleasant aura: their semi-Slav, semi-Teutonic features combine the blankness of the steppes with the cruelty of the concentration camp. But in *my* Centre, these high-ranking commissars of the popular

cause combined warmth with efficiency, the enthusiasm of revolutionaries with the cool correctness of an English Brains Trust. Armando often told me that the Revolution could do with its own meteorological station; that it needed its own telecommunications apparatus to get its bulletins out in good time. But he was wasting his breath, for I knew very well that he came direct from that great central radar station, once hidden deep in the Kremlin, but now shifted lock, stock and barrel to the cellars of the Habana Libre Hotel, or perhaps somewhere under the asphalt of Tien-Anmen Square. I knew too that the Centre included a rifle range, a card-room, a photographic laboratory, a printing press and everything else needed to cope with the demands of world revolution.

As a Marxist, I realized of course that the movement of history obeys irresistible laws. But the world is not an electric clock: it has to be wound up every day. So what we needed was a polyglot and many-headed body of night-watchmen to protect us at sleep and at play, to correct our lapses, and to lead us back to the right path with a firm hand. And, somewhere between the Almighty God of Pius XII and the Pantheon of Virgil, I discerned the great clockmaker of the Revolution, under fifty pseudonyms and a hundred disguises. A Marx with a judo black belt, or a philosophical James Bond, hiding in the cellars of Kafka's castle. Omnipresent. Always slightly amused. And always, *always* right: every bullet on target.

Who spoilt my dream? Who took away my toy? Why does one have to grow up – and find oneself so alone?

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

As long as he lived on the outside, a mere collaborator in the Movement, Frank had managed to fight off loneliness with the same stratagems. He had explored experience with the aid of a European style *machismo* which, though

far more complex, was every bit as pointless in the end as the post-conquistador American kind. With all the women he had had, he never discovered anything he did not already know. Each new and so desirable unknown, once he had got close to her, would throw him back again onto what he was most sick of – himself. He loved the tension produced in his guts by the chase, but each time its release was like unclenching your fist and finding nothing there: he would give himself over completely to the old lump-in-the-throat magic of lovers' talk, trying to fend off the inevitable with a barrage of words, till the let-down came, the convulsion of pleasure when, at a stroke, and it happened every time, the girl he had been pursuing, the girl who gave him the pleasure, ceased to exist.

Celia was the first woman he hadn't annihilated in this way. In her he found a real person, not a ghost that slipped through his fingers. In her was an uncrushable kernel of darkness, a splinter of black quartz that all the verbal acid in the world could not disintegrate. However yielding she might be, there always remained an element in her that resisted. Gone were all the golden insipidities, the balm and honey, the syrups and sirens of the past. He bore no scars from all his earlier affairs and mistresses, for sweetness leaves no scar. Between his chauvinism as a male and his ignorance as an intellectual, Frank had managed to arrive at man's estate without ever once coming up against the other reality, that Martian with a human face that we call a woman. He had yet to experience the electric shock of that utter, though invisible, difference.

He first saw her some way off, strolling in the sun with Armando down a path in the park; and merely to have seen her, though he didn't at first realize it, shattered all the pseudo-classifications he had used hitherto for pigeonholing women – women he never knew, from whom he learnt nothing, whom he encountered without ever discovering them. Armando waved, and he went over to join

them. Boldly he eyed her up and down – but with one look, Celia put him in his place and reduced him to total confusion. Her eyes were black and her gaze was green, falling on him like a cold shower from head to foot, yet burning him too; a look both laughing and sad, dominating and extremely humble. In a flash he felt himself measured, weighed up, held fast; but he did not grasp at first that that look was impregnable and beyond the reach of his analysis. He felt not so much thunderstruck as uneasy. His first response was to be frightened, and to try to evade the chill – or was it contempt? – of that singular gaze. Fortunately Armando was there, and they started to discuss a chapter of Otto Bauer's on the national problem which he was in the process of translating from German. And with Armando between them, he was able not to think about her for a few minutes, or at least to think he wasn't thinking about her. Then, on meeting another acquaintance, Armando moved off for a while and left them alone together. They walked on a few steps without a word. Celia wasn't very beautiful. In fact she was not beautiful at all, he said to himself with a sense of relief. Certainly not by the Junoesque standards of this country. Celia was thin and bony, svelte but tiny, with a face made up of angular lines, sharp and mobile. With her marked eyebrows, deep-set eyes, aquiline nose and thin lips, her face had a look at once mineral and brittle, hard and delicate. Rather like one of those miniature profiles of queens gazing fiercely at you from Egyptian sarcophagi, with elongated skulls and necks like antelopes. The veins on the backs of her hands stood out, but her legs were smooth and tanned under the print dress which the breeze blew up round her knees and flattened against her thighs. All her joints – ankles, wrists, neck – though so fine, gave an impression not so much of grace as of nervous strength and flexibility, a capacity for escape.

She held aloof throughout the foolish ideological con-

versation between Frank and Armando. In the background. Uninterested in the kind of painful generalizations intellectuals string together to produce scholar-talk, without actually saying anything that matters. The park was largely deserted, for it was lunchtime, but any respectable woman who ventured along its paths at any time was sure to be accosted, at least verbally, with obscene comments and propositions; even young mothers with babies were not spared; yet amazingly enough nobody bothered Celia. They seemed hardly to notice her: the male glance would rest on her, but only for a moment, with a certain curiosity; there was something different about her. She didn't look foreign, yet she was evidently not wholly familiar either. She wasn't sexy-looking, she wasn't even strictly pretty, Frank told himself as they parted – and he wasn't saying it as a defence, for he never expected to see her again.

Yet for the rest of that day her presence haunted him, though he couldn't remember exactly what she looked like; indeed the very vagueness of his memory made her stick in his mind, like the cadence of a line of poetry when you can't remember the words, or a well-known face you can't put a name to. He could never get her quite right. Celia looked like a child but moved like a woman – or was it the other way round? She was not white and she certainly was not a mulatto, but she must have some Indian or black blood to give her a skin like that. She was not discreetly made up like the girls at the country club; nor was she like one of those flashy girls he had seen in working-class *barrios* with purple nails and peroxide blonde hair. He didn't remember her wearing either lipstick or mascara. Frank wondered what her background could be – she didn't seem to come from the upper class, yet she certainly wasn't one of the poor. She was obviously no prude, yet there was no hint of coquetry in her manner, and her shyness had its own kind of insolence. Everything

about the girl seemed to be a happy medium, except that the one thing you could say for certain about her was that she was anything but average. From the series of 'neither . . . nors' that he recited to himself about her at intervals over the next few days, it became clear to Frank that nothing about Celia was extreme, except herself.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

A few days later he saw Armando again, and for some time they conversed obstinately at cross-purposes.

'Rossi's asking for another sixty thousand dollars. Carrier's accident insurance, he says. What do you think?'

'Have you seen that girl again since the other day?'

'Rossi hasn't been in touch with *you* at all, has he?'

'No. I only saw his number two in Geneva, and we just talked about shipping the stuff – not money. Better ask Feltrinelli about him – last time I saw him in Milan, he said to be careful.'

'Well, Giangiacomo's being careful all right – it takes three weeks to contact him these days – via Switzerland.'

'Hasn't your girl friend seen him lately? I got the impression she travels a lot.'

'Really, it's better if your friends in the Italian Party don't know anything about this. Last we heard he was supposed to be working with Skorzeny in Madrid – they were sending Mirage components to Israel via Caracas. They say two generals in the Ministry of Defence were involved in the deal, and they had to be paid five hundred thousand dollars.'

'Lucky there were two and not three! Can you give me her phone number?'

'Whose phone number?'

'That girl the other day.'

'I didn't think Genevans were so frivolous. *Why* does he suddenly want another sixty thousand?'

'Better get your girl friend onto him, and find out.'

'You're very interested in her, aren't you? Anyway, she's already got her hands full.'

'Couldn't she go to Port-of-Spain and sort things out, if that's where the stuff's arriving?'

'It's complicated. We'd have to clear the way first by sending someone else as a contact.'

'But sharks don't operate in clear water.'

'If the government heard from a reliable source – from *the* source, in fact – that the district committee is expecting twenty mortars, thirty American bazookas and three hundred Belgian rifles, expecting them here in the city, we'd be finished. They'd call up another couple of divisions at once.'

'Rossi surely wouldn't risk his life for so little?'

'He might not be risking his life – he may know he's got protection.'

'We'd find him in the end. But what about your friend – does she know I know about it?'

'She knows you're working with us, certainly. She knows most things.'

'So I might be able to work with her?'

'You've got a nerve! Perhaps you don't realize how high up she is? She's working on a special assignment with one of the leadership – and she's involved with him personally, too.'

'But they're all in jail.'

'All the more reason to watch your step, you fool. She's very much involved with him.'

'Who is he?'

'Mr Right. Don't ask questions.'

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

It was only two weeks after this exchange that Celia and Frank went to a hotel together, and he discovered how

right he had been to feel afraid of her. Too late. She made love quite naturally and seemed to enjoy it, but by the time she emerged from the bathroom, she had already reverted to being an island again, looking at him from the further side of a river, or across a frontier. Silently, kindly, almost pityingly. Not bored, or reproachful or angry. Not disappointed; not bothered at the sight of him still lying naked and sweaty on the bed, certainly. But she had somehow recovered her distance, and he must not for one moment think he had swept her off her feet with the trivial excitement of an orgasm. She seemed to find him very small: she screwed up her eyes to look at him as though he were a hundred yards away instead of in the same room.

'I must go,' she said, after a long silence.

'I'll take you home.'

'No. I'd rather go by myself. See you tomorrow. Same time, same place.'

She put on her dress, and went. She might have been leaving the office.

Frank felt not so much humiliated as foolish. He could think of nothing to say, and his own stupidity was maddening. Present or absent, he had no hold on her at all. He tried to recall her eyes, her movements, her tone of voice; but all he could summon up were fleeting memories, shifting waves, nothing he could pin down or compare or identify. She had some very strong perfume on, ambergris he thought; but even that he couldn't be sure of, and that was the only bit of her he still had. He shut his eyes and sniffed his hands and the insides of his elbows. Just a trace: heavy and oily, slightly acid, rich yet piquant – yes it was ambergris. All the pet names he had used for other girls seemed laughably inadequate for her, spluttering like raindrops against glass. He would have to think of other, better ones. But she might prove unnameable. 'She's too tense to be a beaver. I'll call her my little kitten. Or per-

haps my squirrel. Those are both creatures that hide, and jump, and play. But no, that's not right. There's something very still and severe about her. She moves without moving.' Nothing fitted her. Perhaps he would finally have to give up trying to capture her. She must be just Celia. 'My absent love.'

Frank could see what the future would be, and resigned himself. There would always, he realized, be this great river separating their two memories, an Amazon of silences, of words he couldn't find. He knew he would attempt the impossible, trying to cross it, rowing or swimming against the current, struggling to reach the other bank, *her* country. He knew that even if he were to love her for a year, Celia would never become for him that warm, supremely reassuring, faceless being one spends every night with – a wife; and that, weave as he might the loving web of a man for his woman, she would always slip through it like water.

Water and quartz: what an enigma.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

There. I've done it. I'm talking about you in the third person, and referring to all of us by our pseudonyms: Celia, Armando and Frank. It's as good as a novel! Quite the conventional romance. I expect you'll find it funny, but I owe it to you to try. We're finally emerging out of the shadows, you and I, starting to exist. If people come across these lines one day, perhaps they'll find us touching. They'll ask, 'But why did the poor things make themselves so miserable? Why didn't they just settle down and have a family like everyone else, instead of all that nonsense?' If they think about us at all, that is. But will anyone in thirty years' – or fifty years' – time have any idea what this world of ours was like? How cautiously we had to get to know one another, how gradually discover

our friends? They will no longer know that there were places where people being spied on could only evade espionage by spying on one another, and the oppressed had to repress every instinct of body and soul to save themselves from their oppressors. That there were places where couples had to lie to each other about their day's activities, so that if one were caught and made to talk the other would not be at risk. Will they even comprehend the words when they read that in Rio de Janeiro, towards the end of the twentieth century, a baby was scalded before its mother's eyes to make her talk? Will they be able to visualize a world where eleven policemen raped a girl in front of her fiancé, and then hung him by the knees from a red-hot bar, trussed like a chicken? Will they realize how hard it was to be happy, to get the most out of life, in a town where a US embassy official could arrive at police headquarters, like a travelling salesman with his bag of samples, to demonstrate the latest thing in electrodes – the finely serrated clamp model excellent, leaving no trace on finger, penis or tongue (unless the patient was so inconsiderate as to swallow his tongue, of course)?

Let me make myself clear, Celia. I am not saying that we weren't able to live because of our enemies. That would be an over-simplification. I'm not making excuses for us – I'm only trying to explain. I want to try to understand why, when the quality of life gets below a certain minimum, some men and women deliberately choose a certain quality of death, in the hope of making life more liveable for others some day. Oh yes, I can hear you laughing: 'That'll make a splendid essay topic for your students when you go home: Did the way Frank and Celia lived become impossible because they chose to disappear in their own way, or did they choose a way of life that was bound to lead to their being killed sooner or later' (such cases are described in the papers as accidental deaths, or the settling of old scores inside the Movement) 'because they hadn't

the capacity to live properly? Consider the various aspects of this problem, and discuss.' You have every right to jeer. But all the more reason for me to go on trying to reconstruct this puzzle in the third person, to put together the scattered fragments of our so uncommon common life, to try to get the pieces into a straight line: introduction, development, crisis, dénouement. It must be done, Celia. Not just for the scholars of the twenty-first century – we've never given a damn about them, you and I, and they won't give a damn about us – but for ourselves. We must be able to look this world straight in the eye.

I ought not, of course, to be saying 'we'. I do not belong to the mineral kingdom, and you do. I am a more humid creature altogether. It's your misfortune – or choice – to be harder, to feel too little. That's something we must talk about, too. One cannot always choose one's ideal posture for the dénouement – but it doesn't matter much whether we die on our knees or flat on our faces, as long as we have lived standing up (*pace* La Pasionaria!). No, seriously let me try to get to the bottom of that lucid and freely chosen madness that was our life. To the very end of our file.

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'Have you bought an oil well or something?'

Armando was looking quite cheerful – for him. He strode up and down the studio, hands behind his back, as if in a prison yard. As if he were counting his paces. To Frank, leaning over the railing of the gallery above, he looked like a man on sentry-go.

'Better than that. Rockefeller made me his personal adviser when he was last here. He's afraid the new socialist legality's going to present problems. There's foresight for you!'

'He's an optimist if he thinks the Revolution's going to pay compensation!'

'Okay. Joke's over. Have you seen the latest news?'

'No,' Frank replied, coming down the steps into the studio, and half-blinded by the light from the huge window. 'If you know what's happening you start thinking, and God knows where it may end.'

It was a funny hiding-place for a man whose face appeared on Wanted notices in every street. In the very centre of the city, on the top floor of an ultra-modern block of flats: a luxurious duplex apartment, furnished – or rather almost unfurnished – as a painter's studio. The austerity of the rich: gleaming white walls, leather cushions, deep-pile white carpet, and on an easel in one corner a large primed canvas, quite bare.

Armando stopped talking and laughed derisively. Frank realized he had missed a long tirade, and tried to pay attention.

'The Revolution is a ghost ship, sailing along on its own. It doesn't need a crew. Everybody is in command – in other words nobody. . . ' Armando was off on one of his monologues, his never-still eyes darting, smoking one cigarette after another, hardly aware of Frank's presence. He was in that state of unreality induced by lack of sleep, or too many pain-killers. With the light behind him, he looked more waxen and more emaciated than ever. Haggard and stooping, with his fuzzy hair, his vulture's beak of a nose and his leather boots, he had that look of an old Bedouin chief that made them nickname him the Sheikh.

Suddenly he stopped in front of a picture, and instead of turning to continue his pacing, he stood and stared at it, as though seeing it for the first time.

'What do you think of –' he paused, trying to find the right word, '– I don't know what to call it – this *stuff*? ' And with a look of distaste, he waved an arm to indicate the canvases hanging on the walls and leaning up against them. They represented the same theme over and over again,

sometimes in charcoal, sometimes in oils; there were busts and whole figures: all of them depicted muscular and heavily made-up hermaphrodites, ambiguous young men, transvestite queens, male prostitutes got up like charioteers, and all in a classical style so mannered and punctilious as to be almost comic. But the poses of the models were not those of Greek statuary, but of modern city youths.

'Call this filth art!' burst out Armando contemptuously. 'Pablo is onto a good thing all right. He certainly can't complain. Our *nouveaux riches* must be buying this with their eyes shut.'

'You must keep up with the times, Armando. It's New York that sets the pace, not Moscow. You can't blame these people. Imports and exports are their living – and they don't suddenly alter their whole outlook when they start decorating their flats.'

Armando shrugged his shoulders, and picked up a crumpled newspaper from the floor; smoothing out the front page, he read aloud, continuing to pace up and down: "Savage Ambush of National Guard Last Night: Bodies of Four Terrorists Abandoned in the Street" – that's the main news story. The Party's central printing press was seized last night – did you know that? It hardly gets a mention, just a paragraph on page three. The ambush is a much more interesting headline, and you can see why if you read what it says: "For the first time, grenades were used in the city by the Castro-communist mercenaries, killing and wounding members of the forces of law and order. . . ."

Frank was not listening. He watched the prosecuting counsel, with his staccato delivery, each sentence barked out and followed by a clearing of the throat, waving the incriminating evidence, marching back and forth in the huge, light room, with a kind of gloomy satisfaction, as though he had finally found in black and white a proof that all his warnings were justified. The central committee had

held no meetings for two years, and in what was called the *Buró de la calle* (i.e. those political leaders not in prison, most of them young people acting as replacements for the ones who were) Armando was in a minority.

'Can you imagine anything more stupid? What useless butchery! Provocative? It's worse than that – it's suicidal.' And he repeated the word, pausing lovingly on each syllable – 'Su-i-ci-dal.' His illness not only made his temper worse; it also filled him with that sinister, feverish jubilation you find in clairvoyants and the insane. 'If those children think you can prepare the way for a revolutionary strike by this kind of pointless killing – firing bullets just for the fun of it. . . Sabotage is one thing – but random butchery, my God! What wicked, stupid fool could have given such an order?'

Frank was completely tongue-tied. It was like being at school, when the teacher suddenly turned and asked, 'Who did that?' He would have felt terrible if he hadn't owned up. He had killed. He could still hear those agonized moans coming up to him in the darkness, cursing him though not in words. He was guilty: it wasn't so much that he couldn't admit it, as that he couldn't understand it. True, he had followed Lucas's directions to the letter, and, after all, war isn't a football game. But he hadn't been encircled, his retreat had not been cut off, it was hardly legitimate self-defence. So *why* had he done it?

He had spent the whole day shut up in his room, not even turning on the radio, brooding, re-living last night through images presented he knew not whether by fantasy or remorse. He usually skimmed over newspaper headlines with little interest, even if they concerned him quite closely. Yet here was this one being waved under his nose like a banner, accusing him. The report contained all the old clichés of international Pharisaism used by dollar-a-line moralists to castigate wrong-doers of all kinds – 'peaceful citizens', 'law and order', '*una sana convivencia*

ciudadano', etc. In itself, it didn't matter much. But there was Armando, brandishing the *Excelsior* with its great black headlines, and apparently seeing this minor excess as a major, disastrous error – the beginning of the end. Perhaps because of his illness (the exact nature of which no one quite knew), perhaps because he did not believe in the kind of urban guerrilla war they wanted and hadn't the tact to conceal his views, Armando was being left more and more on the sidelines by his comrades in the Party. But he was not resigned to being merely a voice crying in the wilderness. They didn't dare push him around too much, and they certainly couldn't get rid of him: after seven years' forced labour and torture, and being reduced to a skeleton, in the hell of an Amazonian prison camp, his position was pretty well invulnerable. Everything he had ever done was a living plea against that endless, aimless dialogue that went on between those who acted without understanding and those who understood full well what was happening but would not act. Yet he and Frank seemed to be embarking on just such a dialogue now.

Puzzled by Frank's silence, Armando stopped pacing, and looked up, the newspaper concealing the lower part of his face. Their eyes met. Frank picked up a charcoal pencil, and began drawing on the blank canvas on the easel – two elongated leaves floating in space.

'Listen, Armando –', and he pressed down with the charcoal; his face too was half hidden by the canvas which stood as a screen between them. 'Let's not mystify the issue. You can't keep professional troops engaged for a whole night with just revolvers.'

'I never said you could. That's not the point.'

'It was the head of the Front's local committee who gave out the grenades. I think he was right. I only threw one myself, and that wasn't at one man, but into a group. There can't have been many others – the arsenals of the *barrios* are empty.'

'What the hell were *you* doing there?'

Armando had dropped his voice – the reflex of a man protecting a friend, afraid the neighbours might hear. His anger seemed to have subsided.

'Diego had to get through last night; otherwise he'd never have got out at all. The half-way contact on the road below the *sierra* is always on a Saturday; yesterday was Thursday. If nothing got through to Andrés this week, he'd probably have given up.'

'And why should the Lidice committee care what Andrés does?'

'It was the secretariat of the Front who asked them to do it – to keep the National Guard busy for the night, get them away from the checkpoints on the road out of the city. They're very anxious not to break with Andrés.'

'But a break's bound to come. It'll have to if the Party's going to survive. Otherwise we might just as well give up altogether and let the Front take over.'

Why was Armando telling him this? Frank was not one of the family. The Communist Party had combined with a few rebel officers to found the Liberation Front: the aim had been simply to attract a wider public to support the cause, but now it found its creature getting out of hand. Galatea was breathing and moving and doing things on her own account, and she might dismiss Pygmalion with a kick in the pants any day now. Andrés, whose job had once been organizing the Party's shock groups in the city, had taken command of the largest guerrilla front, and was getting direct support from the Cubans. He had set up his own arrangements for getting supplies from abroad, by sea, and was intending to take over control of the Number 1 military district – i.e. the capital itself. No one had yet contested the pre-eminence of the political leadership over the guerrilla fronts in so many words, but the unity of the central leadership was certainly endangered.

'Do you think you can make the Revolution by putting

a few more people in the cemetery every night? The same places, the same tactics, and the same lack of results – every time! We seem to be wasting our forces for the fun of it – as though we’ve got such a lot that we don’t know what to do with them all.’ Armando had resumed his striding up and down the prison yard: seven paces, turn, foot forward again, like a clockwork toy. ‘The working-class *barrios* will turn against us if it goes on. And they’ll be quite right.’

‘Well, but on the credit side, remember that Diego did get through all right last night, with the electric detonators in his car. And if you’re foretelling the future, remember that in forty-eight hours’ time the guerrillas on the western front will have finally received an envoy from the national leadership. You must agree that that’ll make a difference!’

The plans for D-day, according to rumour and reckoning, and the scraps of actual information picked up here and there by the militants, seemed to involve guerrilla attacks on key targets in the provinces to coincide with the mutiny of two armoured regiments and marines in the capital. Some day towards the end of the year, it was whispered. Between Christmas and New Year. *¿Quién sabe?*

‘Oh no. If the rising happens at all, it will happen here – and nowhere else. And it all hinges on whether the half-million jobless men in this town want to be revolutionaries or just common criminals. It’s got nothing to do with the great insurrection of marmosets and striped tapirs that Andrés is so busy organizing. And anyway, what possible interest can the inhabitants of Lidice have in the guerrillas’ in-fighting? What difference does it make to them whether Andrés gets his detonators, or his gelignite, or his telescopic sights? I don’t suppose you even knew that our noble commander-in-chief (he hasn’t much imagination, but he certainly takes himself very seriously) specially

asked the secretariat to send him a collapsible telescopic sight for the M2 carbine, because he'd seen a photograph of Fidel with one in the Sierra Maestra? That was Diego's precious cargo, if you must know! At least I hope you managed to get hold of some weapons in Lidice?'

He seemed to be more disturbed over the failure to capture any of the enemy's automatic rifles than over the death of four comrades. Such political algebra Frank found distasteful. Perhaps it was just vanity, because he himself had taken part in the operation; could it be that he was prepared to compute other people's lives in that way, but didn't care to find his own listed with a plus or minus sign on a balance sheet – so many men versus so many guns? He was tempted to reply, 'But there are men behind the guns, Armando – men who paint pictures and dream dreams and love women they shouldn't.' Would Armando ever be concerned with 'data' like that? Things so totally 'beside the point'?

Instead Frank argued that, in the end, what wears people down is not so much unsuccessful engagements, as inaction, deadly passivity.

'No, what wears people down is keeping bashing their heads against the same spot on a wall, when there's a door just beside it.'

'Absolutely. The urban organization is sick. But that's just the point: a whiff of mountain air would do wonders for it.'

'There are always ups and downs. No, Frank, the real problem is different. You're aiming at the wrong target, all of you – you're looking for the wrong remedy. You should be looking the other way. . . ' He stared into space, his voice fading into an unintelligible mutter. He was far away now, as he went out onto the balcony and leant on it like a seasick man on the rail of a ship, his unseeing gaze travelling over the city.

Frank followed him out into what felt like a kind of

Turkish bath suspended between heaven and earth, the heat pouring down on him, enveloping him, pressing his hair stickily against his head. What was it they'd been talking about? They should have been looking down from an attic window into a narrow street, Paris in 1848 perhaps, but instead there lay the megalopolis with its eight-lane flyovers, its cathedral-style banks, its smoked glass polyhedrons, that vast unfinished concrete spiral planted grandly among the hills. A helicopter came to ground some way off, on the flat roof of the Defence Ministry, among all the spiky, angular aerials, the parabolic reflectors, the observation towers. It all struck Frank as a challenge they could never take up: this relentless activity, this ocean of noise, made their little Carbonari movement look a bit silly. It simply wasn't on the right scale for this telecommunications centre where they seemed inadvertently to have established themselves.

Armando was hunched over and motionless, his silhouette standing out black and misshapen above the void. Sudden dejection had replaced his earlier excitement – he looked not so much disheartened as vacant, as though his soul had left his body, wrinkled like worn leather. 'Manic-depressive,' thought Frank, watching him.

Then the gargoyle-shape opened its mouth, and in a different voice, wrenched up out of his guts, Armando said, 'You know what's really killing, Frank? Fighting against computers with shotguns. They're in the electronic age, and we're nowhere near it. If only we could learn a bit of chemistry – that's our only chance.'

Indeed, what everyone was talking about all over the country was thermite. But could a handbook on explosives really be a substitute for a political programme?

'I know. Just turn to page thirteen in the revolutionary's cookbook. Take three parts of ferric oxide to one of aluminium powder; mix well together, compress, moisten with alcohol and leave to dry in the fresh air. Meanwhile,

in another saucepan, stir together potassium nitrate, sulphur and wood-shavings, as a side dish. Serve cold, and run away quickly.'

Armando, never responsive to other people's irony, gave a pained smile. 'Andrés doesn't think it's funny: he's sent twenty of his boys to the Island for that very thing. In three months' time he'll have his explosives men.'

Armando was obsessed with the idea of a special sabotage unit. Ever since his return, he had been working to convince the Party that the war they should be fighting was the oil war: whoever controlled the oil controlled the country. At present the Yankees controlled all production, and sold fifty-eight per cent of it to themselves. For every dollar invested by the companies, they got \$1.27 profit per year – which they did not, of course, re-invest. Would an attack on their pipelines be enough to knock the enemy out?

The Empire had no need to send colonists to this particular colony: it simply sucked it up like a sponge. Oil flowed in all its veins, and corruption, though intangible, was everywhere. This magnificent capital was no more than a kind of general delegation from the oil government (whose real capital was in Houston, Texas, or Washington DC); it was a showroom, with desks for the administrators, and sales-counters. What kept the whole machine going (and could therefore stop it) was well away from the city where the men were who might attack it – the mass of unemployed, the Castroist students, the fighting units of the Front – as well as from the *sierra* where Andrés and his guerrillas were encamped. The forests of derricks, the floating collection stations, pumping systems and reservoirs, were all clustered together away from everything else, islands protected by sheer distance, surrounded by the waters of a lake as big as an inland sea, or a vast desert where nothing grew but great flat cactus. The only weak point was the pipeline, some of it under water, linking the

oil-well to reservoir, docks or refineries. That was the thing to go for, with frogmen and sabotage experts. But it would cost lives; and even at night, isolated operations of that kind could have only a limited effect. On either side of the break, the two nearest safety valves would automatically close, pumping would immediately stop, and a flying squad of technicians would come, by helicopter if need be, to find and repair the damage. The only operations that achieved anything at all were underwater ones, and getting there and getting away presented almost insuperable problems.

'If their oil were really threatened, they'd scream blue murder. Rockefeller would make the White House take action. They'd send in troops, and the regime would collapse – because then, don't you see, *me'd* be the nation? It'd be Creoles against *godos* – the republic against Ferdinand VII. The Empire's different, but the story is the same: Bolívar, all over again.'

Armando returned to his sleepwalker's pacing, the prophet in quest of arms. Why did he have to go on dreaming like that? Was he trying not to see what a dead end they were all heading for? On his return from Prague, they had invited him to give a series of lectures to the Party's cadre-training school, on 'Present problems in the construction of socialism in the People's Democracies'. His first talk began with these words:

'Comrades! As we all know today, every one of the most appalling calumnies the bourgeois propaganda machine has taken such trouble to broadcast about socialism over the past fifty years has been proved more or less true afterwards. Take mass repression, for instance, like the murder of Kirov in our own day: the truth is even worse than the fiction. Since it is for socialism that our Party has taken up arms, it is better that we start off realizing the existence of this problem. There are others, too. . .' Some of his audience thought he was crazy; the rest produced sickly

smiles, assuming that he was being humorous. But in fact Armando had come back more than just disillusioned: he had come back with questions to ask. In all seriousness he set out to present a highly technical analysis of the new methods of decentralized planning and industrial management now in force in eastern Europe. They informed him within a short time that these were extremely complex problems, and that, all things considered, this was not the best time to become involved with them. The rest of his lectures were 'postponed'. The bearers of the red flag were not quite ready to laugh at themselves.

'You haven't answered my question, Frank. What were you doing in Lidice?'

'Being stupid – you've just told me.'

'You were asked to work with the urban network. Not to play soldiers. We've already got too many people doing that. Surely you don't think we need any International Brigades here. You'll have to go somewhere else to do your Spanish bit. You should be negotiating to buy sulphuric acid, not indulging your finer feelings.'

Armando was a loner, a man who couldn't like himself enough to like anyone else, and he only turned his rage against other people so as not to destroy himself quite so soon.

'You never mentioned my finer feelings when you asked me to do the deal with Rossi. Surely it's results that matter. It was you who made me see that politics is the art of using people. The only question is whether I'm any use or not.'

'No, the real question is how long you'll go on being any use. Everyone can be useful for a while, but people get used up quite soon in politics. And once that happens, then they have to be dumped. . . ' He tailed off into a dreamy silence. What was he thinking?

Frank seized the pause: 'As to my "motivation", I *could* say that it's because the main contradiction has been shifted into the crisis area caused by the super-profits

accruing to imperialist capital exported to the periphery of the system – and you'd give me full marks. But you know perfectly well why I signed on like a good Swiss mercenary: I just don't want to get old like my parents, and all the other old folks at home.'

'I thought so,' Armando shrugged his shoulders, 'you don't give a damn about socialism.'

'About the same as you, I should think – except that for me it's still a dream in the future, whereas you've come back from seeing the reality.'

'Well, if we're going to die whatever happens, we might as well do the job ourselves. It's bound to hurt less. It's quite obvious you young people have never actually experienced fascism.' Silence. Then, without warning, his tone changed completely: 'No, Frank, the *real* question – for me as well as for you – is whether – mm –' and he hesitated a little, as he always did when he was thinking hard 'whether we're really sacrificing our lives to make the world a better place, or whether it's just that we don't want to live at all very much. I suppose in all honesty it boils down to whether one is *capable* of living. That's the question for us both, but I don't suppose we'd both give the same answer.'

'Why not? It all depends what you start off being committed to, whether it's the future or the past; it could be an idea, or even a picture. For me I know it's a particular sound, or rather it's the feeling in the pit of my stomach when I hear it: when a million people are singing the Internationale in the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana, only a stone's throw from Yankee-land. Standard Oil and Rockefeller are doomed to fail in the end, you know, because they don't sing. The only real mistake they've made (from their own point of view, I mean) is not offering their shareholders a dream. Capitalism may be better at making fridges and motorways, but it doesn't make people want to sing together. I really think it was people singing together

that made me throw that grenade at my friends' enemies – a far cry from history research in Geneva, I grant you. Or do you think I'm wrong? Perhaps all the stockbrokers on Wall Street form up into a chorus line and sing about the day's prices of Westinghouse or General Electric!

Armando was sitting on the floor, his back to the wall, listening with eyes half-closed, smiling slightly. Cigarette ash fell onto his shirt. He threw up his arms with the resigned air of a racing trainer whose best foal has yet again failed to live up to his hopes: 'Oh God yes, I know all about singing. But what we need is electronics engineers, not musicians. You bloody Europeans – all you come here for is cheap thrills. We're dying of all this romance. What we want from you is petro-chemicals experts and planners. You can get what you want in the films. You could sit at home listening to the Red Army choir in a comfortable chair. If you want thrills, you can play Russian roulette. You won't get them in politics. Not in ours, anyway. Not a hope, *misiú*. Misiú Not-a-Hope – we'll adopt you as our mascot!' (*Misiú* – or *monsieur* – always meant that Armando was putting him in his place.)

'Well, you may have sold your soul to buy a conscience, but I want to have both. That's how we all end up with the baddies, when we were really born to go to heaven with the fools. Takes all sorts, doesn't it?'

'Except that you and I aren't in the same world.'

As a communist, Armando had learnt to forget everything that related to himself as a person. He never talked of his family or his past, except in veiled allusions that only his old comrades could recognize. Frank knew from a friend that he had been married to a Portuguese emigrant now in prison in her own country, and that he'd had no news of her for over a year. She had gone home to Lisbon to visit her family, and the PIDE had arrested her at the request of the American Embassy. She was tortured and put in solitary confinement for an unspecified time, with-

out indictment or trial. In fact, the CIA were having their revenge for failing to get their hands on her husband, and they got the Portuguese to crush her hands in a paper press just to let him know they hadn't forgotten him. Armando had once shown the same friend a photo of his son, aged six, but without vouchsafing any further comment. They said he had a girl friend in the city here, widow of one of the early victims of the repression, but no more was known than that. Armando's rare confidences were political in nature, not personal.

'In our world, not even the best people bother their heads about that kind of thing. You need a per capita income of at least fifteen hundred dollars before you can afford humanitarian feelings.'

'Do you think a man can change his skin by changing countries? Can one transfer oneself lock, stock and barrel to the compartment labelled "underdeveloped countries", and leave nothing at all behind?'

'Do you mean, Can a social worker become a militant just by emigrating to the tropics?' While talking, Armando had got his Browning out from under a cushion, and begun mechanically to unload it and clean it methodically with a rag, first the barrel, then the magazine, then the breech. Then the bullets, one by one. His form of doodling. 'Trouble is, you'll get sick of it, and want something new. It's a long, slow business, history: not the same timescale as one person's life at all. You've got to wait. You've got to be able to wait. What you're talking about is something we'll have to reconsider in two or three years' time. If we're both still here, that is. A guy has to be at least thirty before you can tell whether he's the stuff militants are made of; that's when you've got to resign yourself to not having a family, or a profession or making a name for yourself. Ever. You'll never have a settled life. You're always going to be anonymous, and your personal life will be nil. You watch your friends getting married and having

kids; you see your contemporaries becoming important figures, advancing in their professions – when you know damn well you’ve got a better brain and could be doing their jobs ten times as well. It’s like freely choosing to shut yourself up in a cellar, and looking out through an air-brick at life passing by. Seeing other people enjoying themselves and knowing it’s not for you. And yet all the time you’ve actually got the key in your pocket – you could go out and join them any time you wanted. You don’t know in the morning where you’ll sleep that night; and when you go to sleep at night you don’t know whether you’ll still be there in the morning. It’s good fun for six months. Not for ten years.’

Once again, Frank felt like an eavesdropper: this soliloquy, this despairing summons to hope, was not really for other ears. Not that Armando was giving way to self-pity – his tone was firm, sardonic, resigned. But it could only be himself he was talking of, his own life slipping away pointlessly and bitterly. At the end of the war he had been an up-and-coming young economist; the then government would have gladly made him a minister. ‘One of the finest minds of his generation,’ as they say in the obituaries. But it would never again be said of Armando; when irreligious anchorites like him die, only three old men and two elderly women cousins come to the funeral, and there are no obituaries. For they have already chosen to bury themselves alive, well ahead of time. Once and for all, Armando had renounced newspaper headlines, first-class travel, visits to houses where he was once a welcome guest, and all his old university friends – now ministers, professors, businessmen, successful novelists and painters (like Pablo, who had left him the use of this studio in his absence). Everyone knew his pseudonym, which appeared on numerous Party publications. But very few people realized whose pseudonym it was – a man whom, twenty years before, they had admired and courted. He had taught at the Humboldt

University in East Berlin, apparently, where he had embarked on a mammoth work on Foresight in Historical Materialism. He had never completed what would have been a masterpiece. When asked about it, he would reply sharply (bitterly, too, perhaps) that he hadn't had time, that other things were more important. Apart from anything else, in the on-the-run gypsy existence he led, it would have been quite impossible to cart round the trunk of reference-works he needed.

Above the din of the traffic rose the wail of a siren. Then another. They leant over their balcony: police cars hurtled along, one after another, followed by an ambulance. The few pedestrians on the pavement continued on their way with barely a glance. Armando collected himself, or rather woke up, blinking and stretching. A bank raid? A hiding-place encircled? A bombing in some American subsidiary company's office? It wasn't the best time of day for such operations, but every detachment acted independently, and even the district committee only found out what had happened later, from subordinates, or even from the radio or the newspapers. It might be anything.

'There you are, Frank. While we poor hard-done-by bourgeois sit whimpering in our luxurious studios, the others are out working. Like I said, there's no time to lose.'

'My fault, comrade secretary. I'm a bumptious intellectual, and my chatter is unworthy of a serious communist. What do you want me to do?'

'Well, we've got to find a printer for our handouts, *a*; and *b*, we must get hold of Rossi again.'

'I've got your man for the printing. Manuel.'

'And I've got your woman for Rossi.'

'That's unfair, Armando,' said Frank angrily. 'You're taking advantage -'

'Calm down. I'm only joking. I did send Celia to reconnoitre, but we're going to have to try some other approach. Who is this Manuel?'

'A friend of mine. What's got to be printed?'

'An appeal for D-day, to all the officers, NCO's and men of the Armed Forces. I've just written it. Not signed by me, though – don't worry. The Front has some ornamental top brass up its sleeve; they don't *do* anything, but their signatures are very handsome. Would you believe Lieutenant Colonel Echeverría, the man who led the Puerto La Cruz *pronunciamiento*?'

'Let's have a look. . .'

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Yesterday, Armando asked me why I took part in the Lidice operation (he must have forgotten how he got me to join the Front by making me think I was indispensable!). As usual, I was tongue-tied. I can only think properly when I'm writing.

'History', said James Joyce, 'is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.' I should like to be able to say that. It *is* a nightmare, but I don't think it is one you ever do wake from. Indeed, what makes it so nightmarish is the fact that we can be happy and sleep soundly right through the nightmare. History glides across us like a branding iron that makes no mark; its atrocities leave no trace on those who have witnessed or caused or endured them. Victims and executioners are alike unscathed. One has only to look at the flocks of plump pink middle-aged men to be seen in every town in Europe, shining with health, eating and drinking all day. They have been trotting jauntily along the edge of a precipice for fifty years without a glance down its side, without a moment's dizziness, or a stumbling, or even any prickling of the skin. They have sauntered through the Apocalypse: they've lived through Guernica, Stalingrad, the Warsaw ghetto and Buchenwald – but they've noticed nothing unusual. They bear no scars; there isn't even the flicker of a fire in their

eyes. They have no catch in their voice, no troubled look, no after-effects at all. When you pass one of them in the street there is nothing about him to suggest that he is aware of being a survivor, a man who has been rescued, one of the *saved*. He sits enthroned on a mountain of corpses – brothers who died that he might live – yet it does not occur to him to glance down at them between the dessert and the cheese. All those Rotary Club dinners and business lunches – the platform of skulls on which their tables rest is approached by a ladder of bones and carpeted in human skin. They've strolled through an epoch as though it were their back-garden, as though they owned it and need not even watch where they put their feet. I couldn't stop myself: every time I encountered one of them, I would say to myself, 'What did *that* smooth old fellow do on the side to get his red nose and fat belly?' They certainly were not innocents, those chubby men. What was *that* one doing, when the French police picked up a hundred Jewish kids in the street in broad daylight? Was he deep in thought, or whistling as he looked in the mirror to straighten his tie, or having a discussion with his neighbour in the café on the relative merits of the Beaujolais and the Bordeaux? And where was *that* little fat fellow in the felt hat when Durruti was advancing on Madrid, or when Semprun went through the gates of Buchenwald at the end of his journey? I know it was ridiculous, but when I was a boy I could never reconcile myself to the idea that there were men of fifty – and God knows there were enough of them – who hadn't gone to fight in Spain and could still look their children in the face.

More than ridiculous; it was imbecile. What I had not yet grasped was that those bastards should have been given medals. We could not manage without them. It is their kind who perpetuate the species, sowing seed, training up the young shoots – without them the struggle would have been abandoned long ago for lack of fighters

to carry it on. Ours is the age of conspicuous consumption: consumption of human beings; it needs a constant supply of nice little boys to grow up into soldiers or revolutionaries, cops or strikers, torturers or torturees. (Let's say that at that time I had not yet come to recognize that natural balance, that biological division of society's labour.)

Then, suddenly, my turn came. I suddenly realized with a shock of horror that I was behaving in precisely the same way myself – only worse. All around me was a world of fire and bloodshed: trouble in Algeria, Lumumba in the Congo, Trujillo in Santo Domingo, and the Nazis landing in their tens of thousands in Vietnam. And there was I, quietly, obliquely, sidling my way through this massive corruption, just like all those portly oblivious men whose florid complexions bore witness to so many double brandies. For all my travelling, working on my thesis on Bela Kun, reading *Le Monde*, I was seeing and feeling *nothing*, perched comfortably on my well-cushioned vantage-point. Not just Switzerland, but all of Europe is one great luxury casino, one vast Monte Carlo. It stands on the end of a pier whose supports go right down into the mud and blood, the famine and killing; but our excellent newspapers do a fine job of filtering and analysing and distilling, so that it scarcely bothers us. Where was I the day peasants in sandals made their assault on Dien Bien Phu? The day Frank País was shot by Batista's cops and fell dead in the street in Santiago de Cuba? The day the first US bomb landed on a Vietnamese straw hut? No doubt I was thoughtfully tasting some local wine, or fondling the breasts of my current girl friend, or looking for a quiet spot by the sea for my summer holiday. Suddenly all those men of fifty became my accomplices, my predecessors, my pathfinders; I began to look on them with the feelings of a small younger brother; I became like a poor relation ready to grovel to these pigs to get them to accept me as one of themselves. So it was in disgust more than with any

great resolution that I was led to accept Armando's offer; but what I was disgusted with was myself, and that disgust is not so easily shaken off. Disgust – or perhaps a fear of being left behind at the station when all the trains for history had gone. He was quite right: the reason I had leapt onto this particular train was to escape the fatal effects of contentment, the sluggishness of over-eating; not really to confront the dangers of political commitment. Indeed the destination (socialism or elsewhere) hardly mattered to me, nor did the fate of the other passengers. Just as long as the train kept moving and jolting and going *somewhere* – that was all that mattered.

And if I must eventually grow old, I hoped to bear at least a scar or two – a glint of fire in my eye. And I hoped that the ghosts of those who had died for an idea during my lifetime would remain with me till the day I died. I wanted to be able to look my son in the eye (if I ever had a son) as Armando can his; I wanted him to be able to look me in the eye, as I could Armando if he were my father.

But suppose happiness is stronger than history, strong enough to survive it, in spite of everything. Will there ever be an Apocalypse? No atomic bomb will destroy spring. The day after Doomsday the sun will rise again; a man and a woman will want food, and may even want to make love. Suppose, after all, that that is the ultimate meaning of history?

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Looking for Manuel, Frank rediscovered old haunts. They took him back to the days when he was at the bottom of the ladder and had no important contacts; when people always knew where to find him, and he went in awe of comrades with pseudonyms who knew all about him when he knew nothing about them. When he had not yet discovered that power means the power to disappear at will,

and to see only the people you want to see, when and where you choose. In every contact, the initiative always came from above. Unlike politicians, whose influence is in proportion to the coverage they get in the papers, his comrades formed a strictly hierarchical body in which the higher up the ladder you were, the more invisible you became. The leaders must never be seen in the flesh, or their prestige would plummet; those next down the line were allowed to have faces; underlings might sometimes even have telephone numbers..

Manuel was not to be found: it would appear that he was now chief of one of those networks whose circumference is all over the place, but whose centre (himself) isn't anywhere. Manuel's friends may not have known the rules of the power game, but they were protecting him like the man at the top, guarding all approaches. Frank went from one to another, traipsing all over town, trying every bar, boarding house, bookshop and studio, every friend of a friend at whose house he might be. But all his tactics, and all the authority he had achieved in his own organization, failed to win him the confidence of these outsiders. This collection of exiles, though quite sharply divided into nationalities, professions, coteries and groups, were at one in giving only false clues to this *gringo* with the funny accent. Where was the centre of this great periphery? To Frank it felt just like being back in the old days, when he was completely at sea, with no accomplices, no network of contacts; the days before Armando hoisted him to the top of the tree – partly because of his foreign nationality, which might come in useful, and partly because of Celia, whose relationship with him had certainly facilitated his ascent.

During those early months, he had been through what he supposed was the lot of all catechumens, an initiation: in his case it meant corns on all his toes and elastoplast on his heels. They had sent him back and forth across this vast

city by taxi, by bus, but mostly on foot. There was always a rendezvous in some distant suburb every morning. Between eight and eight-thirty, left-hand pavement as you face north, between Such a Street and Such a Street. Contact will have a bar of chocolate in his hand and be wearing a sailor's cap. Or he'll be carrying the Spanish edition of *Life* under his arm and wearing sunglasses. Half an hour walking up and down the same two hundred yard stretch, eyeing everyone who passed, till the man you were waiting for turned up at the twenty-ninth minute. Briefly you asked him for a light, and he'd give you a scrap of paper along with the matchbox, fixing the next contact for the following day: between five and six p.m., the block between Calle López and Calle Gómez, right-hand pavement, etc. Days and days playing at boy-scouts – a motorally for impoverished pedestrians – and finally a familiar face would turn up, the same contact as a week ago, who had met seven others meanwhile, thus bringing the wheel full circle. And you'd have to tell him that Comrade Vallenilla was terribly sorry he couldn't make it, but would *definitely* be there tomorrow, without fail. Then it all began again.

No fortress could have been better defended than the Front's urban organization, Frank used to think, in the days of his apprenticeship on the nursery slopes. Then, once he'd become a fully-fledged militant and Celia's lover, he had risen to the heights, and been given special missions, both to remote country areas and abroad. And now it was he whom they spent days tracking down from one street-corner rendezvous to another. He who sent messages by a third party to say he was too busy and hadn't got time to come. (In fact he had far too much time, but one couldn't let someone so important be seen just for the asking, without going through that labyrinthine relay race – leaving letters, contacts arriving late, preliminary meetings to test the ground, and so on.) So

now he was at the top – of what he was not quite sure – and he was still ridiculously under-employed. The difference was that now he knew that the fortress they were guarding so carefully was empty – for the very good reason that he was inside it.

Empty like those empty apartments where you might spend three days doing nothing, waiting for a phone call, with only tins of food and packets of biscuits for company. Empty like those endless hours spent waiting for the next contact. Empty like that hand-to-mouth existence when you were always dependent on someone else (you didn't know who) who depended on you (but you knew nothing about them). That life as an employee with no real employment, frittered away in endless waiting between meetings that were far too brief, and often either missed or achieved breathlessly with seconds to spare. That incoherence as periods of exhausting inactivity alternated with bursts of feverish activity, all improvised and muddled and often only saved from disaster by quick thinking at the last minute. And every evening, the weariness, the sense of pointlessness, of having done nothing, accomplished nothing, added nothing to the sum-total of works and deeds that had been the world that morning. Then there were the sandcastles that might last a month (a fresh analysis of the organization, fresh plans of action, a fresh allocation of jobs), schemes set on foot with childish diligence and obsessive persistence, in the hope of contributing, if only slightly, to prevent, or delay, or make it look as though one *could* prevent, the decline – stop comrades from leaving, keep workshops, hideouts and supply depots from falling one after another, put a halt to the chain of arrests. Each sandcastle would become a little more dilapidated than the last, each would collapse more totally than the one washed away by the previous month's wave of repression. And you felt defeat mounting from your guts like vomit. You felt that the water was rising to engulf the

last survivors clinging to the air-vent, like rats in a flooded cellar. And then there were those sword-thrusts in the water, those solitary fits of anger, those endless arguments, those meetings that got nowhere, when you failed to say what should have been said, and spent the rest of the evening going over and over them in your mind, tossing in bed, going back to the beginning; then, of course, the words came perfectly, true, convincing, trenchant – and too late. And the others who were dissatisfied with the last meeting were also spouting away on their own, arguing to the last ditch. They were still humping their suitcases of arms from one hiding-place to another, and their leaflets from one copying-machine to another too. But they didn't have much faith any more, either, though they dared not admit it to themselves, still less to you. So in desperation they all toiled away, each at his own individual section of the work: anything rather than have to think about it as a whole, 'the situation considered in all its aspects'.

But each evening, alone in the apartment, for Celia never came home now, Frank would switch on Radio Havana, the volume turned down and his ear to the speaker. And the moment he heard the rumble of Fidel's voice, gruff but musical, the r's rolling richly, with its lordly sureness, all the weariness and sickness were forgotten. He straightened his back, and turned once again to face the future. Thank God for Fidel lecturing the world on short-wave radio – there was no loneliness he could not compensate for.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

One could neither see nor smell the sea, for the horizon was bounded on that side by a green hillside, with strips of sisal plants. To the south were lower and less green mountains, which fell away into large folds at the foot of

the *barrios*. The city seemed to have shouldered its way in between the two lines of hills, and could only grow upwards. The one way out was a central motorway, branching off as it went into flyovers, loops and complicated clover-leaves. The roads leading off it snaked their way through a tangled forest of buildings, run up hurriedly and with no thought of the overall view, to suit the dictators and speculators of the moment. It looked as though the inhabitants would have to sleep and eat and make love in their banks and offices and garages. Real life was only to be found on the hillsides, at ground – and human – level: around the edges of the city. A yellow python with silvery scales – the *ranchos*, with their plaster walls and galvanized iron roofs – wound its coils right round the glass Babylon, creeping along the hills, in and out of the deep folds. The outline was of a beast lying in wait, black and still, but with the occasional, unexpected twitch here and there. Wherever there was the tiniest scrap of green between two blocks of luxury flats, a make-shift hut would go up in the space of a night, made of planks nicked from near-by work-sites, or metal placards daubed with the colours of the official party. These shanties wormed their way into the most elegant, aseptic neighbourhoods, sometimes even right underneath ultra-modern buildings on stilts. Poverty, come to lick the feet of wealth, with the flash of a knife from time to time in the midday sun. But in the evening, as the sun went down on the rabbit warren of those hillsides – the *ranchitos* – it was like a landscape by Giotto or Mantegna, one of those fortified towns, golden and misty in the background, its edge a line of little cubes of red ochre and burnt sienna. Compared with that central jumble of concrete and steel, a foretaste perhaps of the horrors of the twenty-first century, the leprous hillsides took on a *quattrocento* softness. With, here and there, the lines of a television aerial crossing the lines of the corrugated roofs, stuck up between a tank of drinking water and

the gutter that brought the dirty water down from the drains of people higher up.

The city was as open, as exposed as a whore in a show-window. Over-exposed in fact, bombarded with light: from the sun by day, and the rainbow of neon by night. No shadows, no secrets were left to it. Car chassis, glass-fronted buildings, glossy black road surfaces, and the sun burning down: the cold metal everywhere served only to intensify the heat. It was as though anything earthy (wood, leaves, country smells, leather, fur), anything suggestive of life and its origins, must be kept at arm's length; it was a fifteen-minute drive, but twenty years' distance, to get to it. Wild life, plant or animal, was a threat that must be repressed, barred and muzzled, with great ramparts of plastic, vinyl, formica, chrome, enamel, steel and glass. There was no zoo to stroll in, no public benches where one could sit under the trees. The whole city was smooth and new, still running in, as it were; its walls lacked the patina walls acquire over five hundred years of being looked at; its pavements had not been trodden by generations of feet; and one never saw such a thing as an old chair, worn smooth and shiny, and many times repaired. It was as though a terrible concrete surface had been laid firmly on top of any possible upsurge of life from the savanna – grass or flowers, flocks or herds, men on horses, rebellious slaves. A city with no past, no monuments; its history was no sooner made than it was effaced, in an incessant tearing to pieces, as tunnels were driven through it, new roads laid, skyscrapers demolished and rapidly re-erected. A city of rush, without rest or respite, without shady spots or deck chairs, humming with a desperate fever of go-getting activity, an artificial vitality in perpetual crisis that ill concealed its true secret – the sense of meaninglessness that threatened to overwhelm it.

Criss-crossing this vast carpark of a city, by bus and on foot, Frank discovered the new America from which

Bolívar had unexpectedly fled away, leaving here and there an equestrian statue or a faded portrait – all of them now worn so thin as alibis that people scarcely gave them a glance in passing any more. And in many cases, like everything else, even these had vanished under the bulldozers, as they flattened and erased and levelled out before them all that remained of the past – Amazonian trees along with colonial houses, turn-of-the-century fortified prisons along with the shabby headquarters of early trade unions. Everything that could serve to nourish a folk memory was systematically wiped out, trampled down by this vast new city born of oil. All that was left of the old town to show what used to be was one baroque church façade, one luxuriously restored colonial courtyard with English lawn and stucco fountain, and a solitary, comic baobab trailing moss in the middle of a square as choked with cars as everywhere else. A city with no hesitations, no parentheses, none of those little gaps of shadow and quiet, those bubbles of intimacy and leisure which in other cities will surround a quiet square, a public bench, a cobbled quayside where young couples dawdle hand in hand.

Frank, like so many people, had built up his American dream from afar, much of it from history books and novels he read in Europe. Catapulted by Marquez and Carpentier, here he was, like a little paper pellet, bouncing on a hard flat continent, a world of temporary glitter, a world without depth, without expression, without memories. Remove the bonds of memory, and anything becomes possible, even happiness. Except history, that is. Yet history was what Frank had come here to find. He wanted to know whether for a nation, as for an individual, the future is what the past makes it. Whether their immemorial memory (that prehistory which, though it might have left no wall paintings, could be traced from the way you held your fork, the dreams you had at night, the glance with which you undressed the women you passed)

ultimately forged a stronger bond among people than any intellectual system or willed decision. And whether people must be bound together by prehistory before they could dream of making history together. There is little problem about sharing a vocabulary – anyone can master the dozen words that suffice for a political vocabulary, for instance. A Swiss can easily espouse an ideology or a vision of the future in Spanish. But can he, however hard he tries, enter into that obscure *belonging* that is there, unconsciously, in the body of every member of the tribe, in their mouths before they even learn to talk, in the marrow of their bones, affecting everything they do and say till the day they die, giving them life and smell and colour, and that understanding beyond understanding that is so infinitely more compelling than the letter of the Marxist scripture?

To take one example: Frank was amazed by his comrades' wonderful faculty for forgetting: they could make two different, and equally important, appointments for the same time, three kilometres apart. Such dialectical impudence, overriding the most evident principle of reality, left him gasping. Yet he discovered that in this country people came to terms with it quite easily; they took it in their stride when a cascade of missed appointments broke an entire chain of contacts, producing chaos, making nonsense of orders, and causing the postponement of a long-planned military operation, or the cancellation of a bank raid whose details it had taken twenty men three months to prepare. Or when it proved impossible to countermand a military rising in some leftist regiment, even though it was learnt the previous day that the plan had been discovered by the DIFA. In spite of such incidents, the same men carried on in the same functions and with the same habits – and everyone knew where they were. Except Frank. He felt as lost among them as he felt in this city with its relentlessly straight streets, every block identical to the last.

He was seized with all the nostalgia of a dry river-bed thirsting for its source far back among the ferns and reeds. And his source was Europe. Only now had he come to understand to what extent his cells had been organized, his very fantasies programmed, by Europe. Wherever he might go, he would always take Europe with him, in his guts. When he came to enlist among these memoryless people, he thought he had bidden farewell forever to the loveliness of the Swiss pasturelands, the soothing Tuscan olive-groves, the lush temptations of Normandy and Flanders. But the cities – Salzburg, Paris, Florence, Geneva, Amsterdam – could he ever leave them? How could he keep them out of his daydreams here in this other city? Over there, he might have been able to hold on to Celia; he might even have persuaded her to love him. Indeed, were Celia an emigrant born in Salzburg or Florence, she might have deigned to let herself be loved, even here. Instinctively, she would have known (as one knows all the important, unspoken things that make life what it is) that love was not just a brief contact between two bodies; that love meant working at being together for short times and long, eventful and uneventful, peak points and empty hours. What is meant by ‘love’ in Europe, that is. All Frank could expect from Celia was a memory of bodies intertwined; and she expected nothing at all from him, except a brief comradeship of pleasure. At its best, a vaguely incestuous sense of brother/sister complicity, at its worst and usual, the inevitable corollary of two people’s engaging in different political work which necessitated interruptions in their life together. Trying to love an American with European love is taking a sledge-hammer to crack a nut – a grave miscalculation. But then, calculation doesn’t really come into it. All the calculations have been made long ago, at birth, in the prehistoric nervous system inherited from one’s tribe, on the eastern or western shores of the Atlantic.

Frank wondered whether trying to use the works of Karl Marx to help one make revolution on the shores of the Orinoco was not perhaps a blunder of the same kind. Space and time were measured so differently – the two geometries were based on different postulates. Nor was it just a matter of geometry.

There is a kind of music in the weather which one can attune to the music of one's moods – but how could you distinguish one instrument from another, when the temperature hardly varied from dawn to dusk, and the thermometer barely went down far even at night? When everything was as green in January as it was in July, and the trees stayed in bloom all the year round. In Europe a year was a roller-coaster, a cliff-hanging serial, never a dull moment. Here days, months and years went by, all the same, not a landmark: a grooved record turning so imperceptibly that you finally stopped listening altogether.

Celia was out – somewhere – all day long. And for the past three nights. She had been disappearing oftener than ever just lately. But she always came back when he least expected her. She would change into a different dress and be gone again. Smiling, apparently delighted to see him, but not quite present – her mind obviously somewhere else. She had been different for some time now: he had watched her growing more distant, and gaining in authority. How could you love someone you could never pin down? He could not ask how she spent her time, or even where she went at night. It was not for him to enquire into the reason for any of her absences, mental or physical, and he never did. That was simple security. The less you knew, the better it was for everyone, and there were no exceptions to that rule. It was her job to slip through people's fingers – but it was her nature as well. For Celia, the precautions of the underground were one more refuge against sentiment; but she had no need to barricade herself in now, for she had long ago found her way instinctively to that refuge,

and was safely ensconced there. Put into an orphanage run by nuns at the age of seven, she had soaked up from the all-pervading hypocrisy a cool self-possession that was equal to anything. She emerged at the age of fourteen, without bitterness or regret, but with a kind of serene and pragmatic amorality, and at once joined the Young Communists. If illegality had not existed, she would have invented it. She needed conspiracy as a green plant needs sunshine. No wonder Armando, Guillermo, Joaquim (now in prison) and so many other Party leaders selected her for such special jobs as liaison agent, intelligence assistant, cadre supervisor: such roles were tailor-made for her, fitting her like the golden silky clinging clothes she so often put on when she went out at night.

The inexorable law of covering all tracks, which Frank in turn enforced upon those below him in the organization, was now coming back at him like a boomerang. He had to lay the blame for his sufferings on this most elementary rule: it would have been unthinkable to admit that they were caused by a woman, what his comrades would have called a 'female'. And because he was determined to love this country, he decided that it must be the city and its way of life that were at fault. His various criticisms of the urban guerrilla war (which he considered to be a struggle that led nowhere and had no strategic value) might well be just a kind of sublimated way of getting his own back, not so much on Celia herself as on those who kept taking her away from him – starting with the Party's federal committee, and its emphasis on commando work and urban insurrection.

'If that's what you really believe, what are you waiting for? Why don't you go to the *sierra*?' Celia asked him. 'It certainly isn't doing your disposition any good staying here – you're as sour as turned milk. And anyway, you've been here too long. The police are bound to notice you in the end, and then we'll all be in trouble.'

He replied that the military committee had given him a mission. He could not leave until the arms arrived; and anyway, whatever the results of the insurrection when it happened, the situation would then be a lot clearer. What was the point of going to the *sierra* if the regime was going to collapse in twenty-four hours and he had to come straight back?

In fact, though he dared not say so in so many words, Frank tried to convey to Celia that he would have been only too pleased to go if she would go with him; she was a nurse, after all, and the Front badly needed nurses. And there were several women up there already as fighters. But she turned down the invitation before he gave it: Celia had little time for what she called 'the visionaries of the *sierra*', 'mini-Fidels', 'suicidal *foquistas*'. She was for the Party rather than the Front, and to her mind the young hotheads who had taken over from the imprisoned leaders were usurpers. 'Maybe some day, if Joaquim agrees,' she had added, ever the disciplined militant. (Or was she merely reminding Frank that he was only her stand-in lover, and that she could never take such a step without consulting the rightful holder of the title?)

Frank was disconcerted. 'But Joaquim has just been sentenced for life,' he said. 'What's he got to do with it?'

'As far as we're concerned, "life" is just like everything else—a conjunctural problem,' she had replied enigmatically.

But anyhow, it was impossible to imagine her leaving her native city, where she slipped around as easily as an eel in the Caribbean. Yet even eels find hollows in which to mate, gliding together in and out of the caves of coral. Where could he ever catch hold of Celia? What corner could he get her into? With the natural camouflage of nature, like one of those insects that merge so totally into a tree that snakes can coil right round their branch without discovering them, she had become, like her city, convex, smooth and slippery.

Its absence of history was in fact her prehistory. Its web of motorways was like her network of blood-vessels, her nervous system. Every bit of her was a part of this gigantic garage, where the tar was sticky in the sun, where the narrowness of the pavements and the length of the distances tired the legs and saddened the heart, where neither body nor mind could wander idly. In this peculiar city one could never stroll (without the risk of being run over by a car) or pause by oneself in the shade of a wall (there were no places enclosed by walls). A semblance of solitude was to be found in the cinema by day, and inside a car by night. There Frank could recover something that approximated to the cosiness of the past, something to dream of at night as he sped along the highways in a hired car or a taxi. As the blank walls and wooded slopes rushed past him at speed, he gazed enviously at the Fords, the Chryslers, the regal Cadillacs gliding alongside, looking as motionless as the attendant's booth beside the roller-coaster; the purple light from the dashboard would briefly silhouette a couple huddled together on half of the front seat, reminding him of the past, of his own early encounters with Celia. Of that short period when they would go for their lovemaking to motels reeking of petrol-fumes, specially designed for illicit couples, where you drove in, and went straight from the garage to your room, straight from car-seat to bed, without seeing a soul. You paid your bill at a revolving window of opaque glass, without having to confront a manager or even a chambermaid. To Frank, this sex-by-the-hour, in well-guarded anonymity (the locale hermetically sealed, underground, with artificial light even in the daytime, like a top security cell in a prison, and no furniture beyond the functional bed/bidet/radio), represented the ultimate refinement of winter conspiracy. He even felt a certain nostalgia for it.

Now they were in the privileged position of being able to take a two-room flat together, and leave their belongings

there for several weeks at a time. Those anonymous refuges could be left for couples without any such hope: when one or the other had to live underground, they could still meet there from time to time. But it had become more dangerous: the police had recently located and captured a member of the federal bureau, who had been underground for three years, by tailing his wife to a suburban motel. Frank's insistence on recalling to Celia such intimacies of the past reinforced her in the view she was gradually coming to have of their relationship: that it was getting to be out of control, an influence which the organization could not safely allow to continue for much longer. And it made her feel quite uneasy herself. Or at least, that was what he gathered from her comments, or rather the series of sallies punctuated by silences that had become her fashion of conversing with him. She was coming to sense more and more that this man found some curious problem about existing, a strange inability to live; a whole train of harmful and corrosive phantoms and obsessions followed him everywhere, and she was afraid not so much of being infected by them herself (she needed no vaccinating, for her immunity was natural, ancestral, geographic) as of possible turbulence they might cause. In this part of the world the 'conjuncture' could change in the twinkling of an eye.

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'Hullo, son! Don't look so worried!'

A smell of ink and damp paper wafted through the half-open door of the printer's workshop, as Manuel came forward with outstretched arms, treading lightly in his sandals and cotton socks. Seeing once more the ill-shaven round baby face, the almost bald head, the smiling eyes, Frank knew at once that nothing had changed. Manuel greeted him as though they had only parted the day before:

'I was told you'd been looking for me. Frank wants something, I said to myself.'

'Well yes, I do, but I hope you don't think that's the only reason.'

'Don't apologize: I like to feel needed. What can I do for you?'

'I've got this appeal to print – a manifesto, or tract, I don't know what you'd call it.'

'Well, let's put the kettle on first. You've got time, haven't you?'

He must have been sixty, but the child in him was still young. Perhaps that is what maturity means, Frank thought, watching him move about, his back to the light, wearing the familiar blue denim trousers and the white shirt with the frayed collar, with the pallor of the agoraphobic, and the half-cheerful, half-grumbling manner he had found so perplexing when they first met – he could never tell whether it heralded an explosion of laughter or of rage. He knew now though.

Manuel was already under way, continuing the story he had begun four months previously: 'You remember when I told about how Orlando arrived with the letter from Pierre, he hadn't eaten for forty-eight hours, and he literally hadn't a penny, and he had to. . .'

For Manuel there was no such thing as absence. Friendship was a contract for life – a very different matter from the one-day effusiveness of people in this country: within five minutes of meeting you, they'd be offering you their house, their car and their daughter's hand in marriage, swearing eternal friendship: yet two days later they'd barely recognize you if they met you in the street. But Manuel kept his entire circle of friends around him wherever he went, whatever he was doing. He was linked by invisible threads to almost every capital city in the world. His friendly winks and whispered asides were directed over a radius of six thousand kilometres. ' . . . You

know Pierre, that friend in Toulouse whose address René gave me, who suddenly landed up in Buenos Aires – in La Boca. He got to Santiago's place just after Santiago's father-in-law had left for Toulouse. You must remember that, it was such amazing bad luck. Santiago was just out of prison for organizing the strike against Perón. . . '

Frank lost track again. But it didn't matter: his peace of mind had returned. Arrests, tortures, uncertainties were all forgotten. Manuel, wanderer over the face of the earth, had opened the door and brought him back into the family circle – for, though he himself had no children, Manuel's immediate family consisted of half the human race. The other half might not have existed, for he never spoke of his enemies. With the friendly half, amid the jumble of Christian names and nicknames, it was hard at first to get one's bearings. It consisted not of classes or parties, but of individuals; it was a great tapestry of interwoven stories, quite unlike the parallel solitudes Frank had by now become used to. Manuel had cousins and great-nephews, brothers and sisters, in every country in Europe and America. His map of the world was the map of his friends. A network of unbroken friendship was wrapped around Manuel's terrestrial globe, holding it like a string bag. That network of love had quietly slipped Manuel into the country with the noisiest radios, the most raucous electoral razzamatazz, the most garish advertisements in the world. Amid all that vulgarity and gangsterism Manuel might have been expected to lose heart and seek some safe retreat to hide in. But he represented a group of people (perhaps the only one left) for whom friendship was hedged round with no conditions, and he remained self-assured and managed to get things done. In him love was certainly not a weakness.

' . . . They'd collected plenty of money for the father-in-law to take with him. He had to get Max out of prison, which meant going straight to Barcelona, and luckily

Alfredo was still working there as a shoemaker, which gave us a good base to work from, but with Pierre away, it was hard to do very much in Toulouse. . . ' Manuel seemed to know all the people he talked about intimately: craft-printers, railwaymen, clerks, barge-owners, singers, bus-drivers, teachers, booksellers, tanners, shoemakers, librarians, local government employees. Frank could hardly believe his eyes: here was a man who combined underground work with good fellowship. Perhaps it was just that he'd been conforming for too long to the impersonal aridity of clandestine life: travelling alone, avoiding people you didn't know and even (sometimes most of all) people you did know; not having friends but only furtive and strictly functional 'contacts'; never being able to greet a comrade publicly in the street, for fear he might be being tailed, and they might then tail you, or even that he might have been arrested unknown to you, broken by torture and then released to be trotted round the city as bait. Comrades who were at liberty, too, might suddenly disappear one day without warning, on some mission they couldn't mention even to their best friends; you'd have been with them the previous day, laughing and drinking together and discussing the future – and then you'd suddenly hear that they'd left, and perhaps you'd never see them again. The fanatical security, no longer just a technique, but a way of life and even for some people an ethic, ended by creating a wall of indifference, insensitivity and at times positive cynicism between comrade and comrade.

With Manuel, Frank felt he was back in the fresh air, where he could breathe again and feel the solid ground beneath his feet. This man was *real*. There was a granite sureness about him, a sense of a hand held out that one could safely grasp in a storm. These good people he talked about, like himself, were neither phantoms, nor friends, nor fools. In fact, it was Frank who felt like the phantom,

as he listened to these roundabout stories from which there emerged and took clear shape a compact, cheerful and thoroughly sane community. Frank's friends in the underground were, like Manuel's, wanted by the police at top level; but most of them would have been of interest to the psychiatrist as well. Not least Armando. He wondered where these people got their mysterious stability from, living permanently on the run without ever becoming nervous wrecks. They spoke a different language, and it took Frank some time to discover what it was: it was unfamiliar, and in some ways a bit irritating, and it couldn't be translated into Marxist jargon (that algebra that so successfully conceals the precise subject being talked about).

At the beginning he had picked up some rather confusing clues, words that had caused a faint glimmer, like flashes from a far-off lighthouse. *Compañeros*, for instance: Castroists were the only people who called one another that. But Manuel didn't belong to the MIR: he had never been to Cuba, and anyhow was of an earlier generation. Was he a communist then? But communists spoke of each other as 'comrades'. Bourgeois socialists spoke of 'friends'. Christian socialists of 'brothers'. Manuel spoke of his absent brothers as '*compañeros*', and called *compañeros* who were present 'brothers'. He had called Frank 'son' very early on, presumably because of their respective ages, and also because Frank was not of their brotherhood. Hard to place him. All these Renés and Maxes and Santiagos who hove into view in the distance from time to time were only birds of passage, travellers, strolling players without an audience. They were the knights-errant of a hazy ideal – an ideal between two oceans, two ages, between birth and death, an ideal that was itself in transit, in mid-metempsychosis. More errants than knights in fact.

It took Frank some months to realize that this strange yet familiar world, this world of exiles who shared their

possessions in common, of pilgrims with no shrine or catechism, no passports or passwords, friends of friends introduced by a third party and sitting down to supper in the house of a fourth, working for six months in Montevideo, then a year in Mexico, then two years in Perpignan, was nothing more nor less than the world of anarchism. Or, to be more precise, of anarcho-syndicalism.

He had hesitated for some time to utter that word. Not for fear of uncovering some secret, disclosing membership in a sect or an order – as one might feel about asking a freemason a straight question, was he or wasn't he? What was extraordinary about Manuel's society was that it was so totally *un*-secret; one entered it without concealment or initiation, with no card to be stamped, no entrance exam. It was more a fear of looking foolish: Manuel would have been the first to laugh at anything so childishly doctrinaire as 'anarchism' – in fact they would both have laughed themselves silly. Generally speaking, Manuel never spoke in generalizations: he only knew particular cases. Nor was this an affectation: the world of *isms* was as alien to him as the deep sea to a bird, or the sky to a fish. The most abstract word Frank had ever heard him use – and that was only once – was 'libertarian'. There is no need to keep talking about things you take for granted; it is only when you want to drown out the rumbling of your own doubts that you have to keep on bombarding other people with your convictions. Manuel was the reverse of a fanatic: like his beliefs, his tolerance was unshakable, but irreverent.

He put some maté leaves into his calabash, and poured boiling water onto them; then, having stirred it with the pipette, he passed the whole thing over to Frank.

'No, no, after you. Gauchos first is the rule, isn't it?'

'Okay. You might as well admit you don't like it. I expect you'd rather have China tea – that's what your smart people drink, isn't it?'

‘What about *your* people, Manuel – how are you getting on with them? What about the old maids on the Spanish exiles aid committee? I don’t think they’re ever going to forgive the Revolution for going to bed with someone else! I just can’t see you with that lot.’

‘But I’m not a republican, and I’m certainly not Spanish any more. I’m a survivor, Frank. Just like them. Only I keep on at a steady jog-trot; I’m in no hurry. I don’t want to start too fast, you see, because there’s still such a long way to go.’

Manuel had gone through life on foot. In one hand his old brown cardboard case fastened with a bit of string, in the other his maté which he sipped everlastingly. Always on the move, with no ticket and no destination, moving on undismayed from one failed revolution to the next. On foot, or on mule-back. Sometimes by train. One of those late-nineteenth-century steam trains made in Liverpool, with wooden carriages with little railed platforms at the end, and plush-upholstered sleepers, puffing out their smoke, day after day, night after night, from Buenos Aires to Cochabamba, from São Paulo to Santa Cruz, from Oruro, four thousand metres above sea-level in Bolivia, to the sea-port of Antofagasta in Chile. Or, when there was no railway, in those undependable coaches, those improbable lorries full of Indians packed in clusters on top of bags and bundles, so full that sometimes, when the vehicle jolted or skidded, some would fall out of the open back and be left by the roadside – the driver in his cab not hearing, or pretending not to hear, their shouts for help. Or those *colectivos*, half-bus, half-taxi, which defied all probability in their determination to get up and over the Andean passes, and convey their customers from Colombia into Ecuador, from Guayaquil to Chiclayo, pitching and rolling along the ill-made winding rubble roads; people would embark on them for two days and a night, with their thermos of coffee, their grilled corn on

the cob, their mess-tin of stew, and a brief prayer to the *Virgen santísima* as they set off again after each halt. Manuel knew nothing of air travel; no doubt he was too proud. He had done the equivalent of several trips round the world, but always either by land or on those ancient boats overdue for the breaker's yard, which offered steerage-class repatriation at cut rates. He sometimes travelled by car, but could not himself drive. People like him are born in the third class, and seem never to leave it – to their dying day they never even discover the existence of the first and second!

'Don't you ever get homesick?'

'Where's home? I've had so many! I suppose I've felt homesick for them all in my time, but for quite a while now I've felt at home wherever I am.'

There it was: not the contrived bitterness of the outcast, posing on a rock in mid-ocean for posterity to pity, but a man who always felt at home. More or less – or perhaps it was just that the idea of 'home' no longer meant much to him.

'Well I envy you. I feel totally at sea in this country.'

'It's a question of time. You'll get used to it.'

He made Frank think of a retired hall-porter – always feeling cold, even in the tropics, complaining about draughts, hankering after his stuffy cubby-hole. Nothing would ever warm him: the cold had entered his bones and was there for good. The icy wind that rattled the doors and windows of the tin-miners' huts had found its way right inside him, and would chill his body from within till the day he died. He had absorbed the *altiplano* into his bloodstream, poor man, and wherever he went he would never shake the freezing Andean stones out of his shoes – they had got in through the holes and were now embedded in the soles of his feet. He wrapped himself around in ponchos that had seen better days, in layers of vests and sweaters and cardigans, but it made no differ-

ence. He still had the dripping nose, the catarrh, the incessant cough, the incurable chronic bronchitis which, though it wasn't contagious, he seemed to have contracted by contact with friends who had silicosis – out of sheer sympathy, presumably.

The boarding-houses Manuel stayed in on his endless travels up and down the continent were all the same, prefabricated by desperate poverty. Tiny, high-ceilinged bedrooms, like boxes, small rooms carved out of larger with flimsy partitions: thirty-watt light bulb, a threadbare greying rug, dank floorboards, windows spattered with fly-shit, creaking bedsprings, yellow-stained chamber-pot. Not quite up to James Bond, the angular passages smelling of urine and burnt fat, that led to the quarters of this particular international subversive agent: and the quarters themselves might consist of just the angle between the back-yard and the kitchen, or even the couch in the front hall, where the continual stream of people wanting to see him all day and all night made sleep impossible. These (mainly illiterate) waifs and strays Manuel would at once transform into members of his universal family, with no sense that they should feel any obligation to him for writing their letters, listening to their problems, raising their morale, and somehow managing to find money to 'lend' them. He was not a man who could ever ask for it back: it was doubtful whether he even knew the meaning of words like 'debt' or 'interest' or 'repayment'.

His father had died of ill-treatment received in prison, and the fifteen-year-old Manuel watched him die, crying in his delirium that the Revolution had triumphed. Thenceforth the boy swore never to put faith in any utopia. His own perspectives converged at a vanishing point on the horizon, with the vision of a free association of federated producers, without armies or frontiers. That was his personal utopia, but he knew full well that as you walk forward the horizon recedes, and that if heaven seems

within your grasp it can only be a mirage. But when he died, thought Frank, what a lot of men would die with him!

Manuel was a man of the spoken word – far too generous and alive to be fettered by printed characters. The old typographer distrusted words set down in books – little cardboard cases where ideas died as they dried on the paper, where men shrank till they finally disappeared, parchment mummies wedged into the tiny coffins of folio volumes. It was as though the letters of the alphabet were so many ill omens, signifying dust and ashes. As though once you put living matter down on the page, it gave off a deadly, fatal, musty smell. Instinctively he made a face when he saw a library or even a bookcase full of books. As a printer, Manuel was apprehensive of the burial rites of his trade, and disliked the well-ranged mausoleums of the libraries. He liked life, and spent his time passing on by word of mouth the lessons the dead have to teach the living – the mini-histories that, laid end to end, make up history – for in his view everyone's life was significant, and no two were alike. In the sense that he was a man governed by an idea, Manuel was certainly an intellectual. But if an intellectual be taken to mean a bookman, then he was not. The spoken word was always good enough for him.

If ideas in themselves had the power to make people friends or enemies, Frank and Manuel would have been enemies. Yet however much Manuel might make fun of Marx and Lenin and Trotsky, however irrelevant he might declare them to be, Frank could listen to him for hours, and never find himself bored or annoyed. Their differences actually seemed to bring them together. While, oddly enough, the discussions Frank had had lately – and not just lately, for this went back to the days when one was still allowed to laugh and disagree – with his comrades in the Party and the Front, his co-religionists

one might say, had the opposite effect. They tended to leave him feeling resentful, partly because he was always defeated in these verbal duels, but partly because of a deeper sense of bitterness, of having somehow been lowered by them, which remained with him for a day or two afterwards.

'Well you've done the right thing this time, Manuel, coming here. Unless the Front slips up, the regime will have fallen in two months' time. They won't even get a chance to set up elections – the Revolution's going to catch them napping – you'll see.'

Manuel sighed and shook his head, and looked at him with a weary smile. Frank reddened. Such a propaganda speech was unworthy of their friendship. He had forgotten who he was talking to. Too late, he remembered that none of those words were in Manuel's vocabulary.

'Don't go on at me about your Revolution. What you're aiming to do is quite right, but how is it all going to end? That's another story.'

'You mustn't be such a defeatist, Manuel.'

'Me a defeatist? If I was a defeatist I'd have got the hell out long ago!' And indeed, though every battle he'd been in had been a losing battle, he still approached the next one with all the enthusiasm of a novice – hurling himself wholeheartedly into it, but with no illusions.

'Maybe you don't think in terms of victory or defeat, Manuel, but what we want is power – not for its own sake, but for what we can do with it. Do you think that's obscene?'

'No, it's not obscene – but it's a bit vague. When you talk about victory, *whose* victory have you in mind?'

'Well, broadly: the victory of socialism, of the proletariat, of justice.'

'I could have told *you* that. Anyone can produce high-sounding words to explain *what* it will be a victory for. I asked *who*, not *what*: You? Me? The man at the corner

drink stall? The prostitute over the road? The boy selling evening papers?’

‘All the people you’ve mentioned, and a few million more. Even people who don’t know about us and don’t want us – because they’re not allowed to find out – we’re working for them too. Even if there’s only one person to make the Revolution for all of them, it will still be *their* victory.’

‘Now, son – do you make love to Celia in order to perpetuate the species?’

‘Come off it!’

‘Okay. It’s the same with me. I’ll print your tract, but I’m not doing it to win any victory, or make the Revolution as you’d say. If I were you, I’d rather spend my time working in the unions, organizing workers (oil-workers especially) and trying to teach them something. That’d do far more than getting four officers round a table to make a paper junta, or putting a left-wing general in place of a right-wing one . . . Here, your maté’s cold – hand it over. . . Speaking for myself, I’d be happy if I could get rid of this grotty old stove and get one that works! . . . You know what we used to call the army in the old days? The “organization for collective crime”. And politics was “the art of hoodwinking the people”. You’ve read a lot, and I expect you think that’s an over-simplification. But I’ve seen a lot of armies *and* politicians, and I think you couldn’t have two better definitions.’

‘Speaking of definitions, Manuel, have you heard this one? A revolutionary is a man who’s got the date wrong.’

‘It wasn’t a revolutionary who thought that one up!’

‘Well you mustn’t get the place wrong either, Manuel. This isn’t Spain, and it’s not 1936. Armies can change, you know.’

That was below the belt – and stupid. Manuel hadn’t chosen his age, or these particular adopted countries. He went either where he was officially deported, or where

he could find a friend, or a friend of a friend, to give him refuge, or where he could get a job. But Frank felt that he must prepare the ground a bit before reading him the appeal from Armando that was still in his pocket.

'Perhaps,' said Manuel thoughtfully (and for the first time Frank could see a shadow of unhappiness over his face, veiling his grey eyes). 'Perhaps we *are* wrong about the time. Or perhaps – *¿quién sabe?* – it's the right time but the wrong people. I'm not saying it's anyone's fault. But I'm just sticking to my job, and that's all.'

In Manuel's view, the workers' movement had gone off on the wrong tack in opting to follow Marx rather than Bakunin, a hundred years earlier. It must be given time to get over its infantile disorder: Marxism. He watched the gigantic paranoia of authoritarian socialism without anger or bitterness; his was the kindly attitude of a Kropotkin, dying in exile in his native Moscow, resigned to the temporary triumph of Lenin. Since none of all this depended on him, Manuel made it a rule to think of other matters. He was waiting for better times, and meanwhile he worked at day-to-day solidarity: chasing up a lost contact, passing on the money from a collection to the Miners' Federation, repairing a comrade's car, printing a magazine, supporting a local strike. Any practical help he could give he would – depending on the occasion, the country, his own situation at the time. His guiding aim was always to unite workers everywhere into one great family.

'Well, son, are you going to give me your tract, and stop crumpling it up in your pocket?'

Frank pulled out the typed sheets of airmail paper. The same copy Armando had read to him. A bit reluctantly: Manuel might well react as he had himself, on hearing such a piece of flag-waving bombast – and burst out laughing.

'I'd rather read it to you first, if you don't mind. Putting in the expression. This place isn't bugged, is it?'

'They wouldn't bother with anyone as insignificant as me! You're quite safe to go ahead, son,' and he refilled his calabash with boiling water.

Frank began to read: 'Proclamation of the National Liberation Army, to officers, non-commissioned officers, cadets, guards and soldiers of the armed forces: Our country is going through one of the most agonizing phases of its history. . . ' Manuel listened attentively as the phrases poured out: 'pack of traitors in the service of imperialist and oligarchical interests' . . . 'the apostates of our nation' . . . 'servile and arrogant criminals' . . . 'the free nation of our fathers' dream' . . . Right down to the final '*¡Venceremos!*'

When he had at last reached the end, Manuel put down his thermos. 'It can't be serious, can it?' he said.

'It's fairly typical. After all, remember it's not addressed to Spanish anarchists or Swiss Trotskyists. You and I aren't the right public for it.'

'You're right, I suppose. If we find it funny, other people are bound to take it seriously. More fool they – but that's not our business.'

'How much will it cost?'

'Depends how many copies you want.'

'Twenty thousand.'

'What about paper?'

'We've a friend who can nick some from the *Excelsior* : you can have it by this evening if you like. Will ten thousand dollars do?'

'Don't be silly. That's far too much!'

'You can always give back what you don't need.'

'They come expensive, your friends in the army.'

Frank laid ten packets of 100-dollar bills on the table, one by one. Manuel watched him unbelievably, as though it was nothing to do with him. 'Take it, anyway,' said Frank. He had no idea where it came from – could be a hold-up, perhaps, or ransom money, or Cuba (the great milch-cow

of all revolutionaries, real revolutionary workers as well as romantics and swindlers). If we fail, it won't be for lack of money, thought Frank, as he counted it out. Other things, maybe: people like Manuel, for instance. 'It's not a personal favour I'm asking, after all,' he said, to make Manuel feel more comfortable – though he was not very comfortable himself. 'It's political work. Obviously there'll be expenses.'

But even as he talked, Frank was in the process of making a rather dangerous – even perhaps a paralysing – discovery: that more important than whether a thing is true or false, right or wrong, is the question whether it is noble or ignoble. Manuel's life was based on a whole different value-scale, it seemed.

'Give me a ring in a couple of weeks, son. I'll find the money myself.'

The 'son' beat a hasty retreat. The ironic dedication of this elderly child, who could shrug his shoulders and turn down ten thousand dollars, raised altogether too many questions in his mind for comfort.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Can it be that the *virtù* of a revolutionary is in proportion to the number and seriousness of the questions he refuses to ask himself? Starting with that most taboo of all questions – the precise meaning of the word 'revolution', to which he has devoted his life, and to which he will owe his death. It is a marvellous word, a word of suffering and splendour, whose full basso richness, velvet depth and fiery tongue only really emerge when it is spoken in Spanish. But what does it mean? What will it do? At what cost? With what ultimate object?

These questions may seem relevant to the outsider, but they bear no real relation to the subject. For revolutionaries are too disinterested to reflect on anything so base

as the usefulness or possible results of what they are doing, or to define the limitations of the Revolution. It is enough for us to do our job properly: we can leave it to the amateurs to waste time asking questions. Apart from the waste of time and energy involved, such questions would deprive the Revolution of its point by subjecting it to cheap criteria of effectiveness meaningful only to non-revolutionaries. Those who want to win world power must prize their precious blinkers above all else. The secret of our progress lies in that area of blindness, and it would be criminal folly to try to throw light upon it. As bad as for a painter about to start work on a blank canvas suddenly to find a philosophical demon at his side explaining at length why Hegel places painting (especially Rembrandt's painting) half-way between sculpture and music in the hierarchy of epiphanies of the spirit. Or for a man about to make love suddenly to be presented with a section-drawing of his partner's pelvis accompanied by an anatomical commentary.

With this difference: we are artists who produce no works and have no public. The idea that a thing is all the more beautiful for being useless appeals not just to the avant-garde of the art world – much as one admires their current infatuation with the automatic and the evanescent, with sculptures that only take shape by catching fire, kinetic forms in continual movement. The moral disinterestedness of those dedicated solely to 'serving the masses' produces a variety of sudden happenings in which the actor is consumed in what he does, the workman sets himself on fire with his work – a Buddhist priest burns himself to death. Nothing is left but a little heap of ash on the pavement, a paragraph in the local paper, a vague memory in the mind of a distant cousin in Switzerland. Indeed, the last genuinely modern artists are the professional revolutionaries: they are the only people who can laugh at themselves. The supreme, ludicrous illusion – the

will to live, that final vanity of the ego, the mere concept of an opus, a memory, a record of any kind – they have sent up at last in smoke.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Do you remember that last discussion we had? I hadn't seen you for three days, and I'd just persuaded Manuel to help us with the printing. I should have been absolutely delighted to find you 'at home'. You'd just come in, and you were hanging up a very respectable navy-blue suit, an air-hostessy, bank-clerky kind of suit, one I'd never seen before, whose presence in your wardrobe I couldn't explain. And instead of kissing you, as I wanted to, I made a scene -- which was not what I intended at all. It was thoroughly conventional: a conjugal spat, a lovers' tiff, a where-were-you-last-night, most-elementary-decency type of scene. I found myself playing the part of the outraged husband: it was too strong for me, I couldn't help it; I must have learnt the words long ago before I can remember, and felt obliged to recite them as perfectly as I could. And you laughed; and you kept on laughing. You put away your bath stuff and your make-up, and just let me go on pouring out my spiteful speech. Then you let down your hair and stood there brushing it in front of the mirror, quite calmly. I told you you didn't love me, you'd never loved anybody, you had no feelings.

'Listen, Frank,' you said and suddenly you were serious. 'I honestly don't know what you're talking about. I don't know what you mean when you say "love" We don't speak the same language. We'll never understand one another.'

'It's not a question of language,' I said. 'Some people have got a heart, and some haven't – that's all.'

'Well, I've got a body, and that's enough for me,' you answered, and you shrugged your shoulders. Then you

turned your back again. That was the last thing you said. More's the pity.

I didn't understand you then. Didn't want to, or didn't dare. I'm wiser now – too late, as usual. What in my European mind I think of as *l'esprit de l'escalier* – and in some curious way it is more than just a figure of speech: in fact I wonder what would happen to our famous wit in a house without a staircase, one of your bungalows. It took me several days to measure the gulf between us, which you summed up so precisely in those few words. Your little phrase gave me to reflect for some time. To reflect that I should not reflect so much: or rather perhaps that I should reflect the way you do, like a mirror, just giving back what is given to it. Saying the phrases that come into one's mind without thinking, for really, the mind doesn't enter into it: it's the body that does the deciding. But as far as I was concerned, I think it was already too late. What I should have done, what I should still do, I am afraid I can't do. The die seems to be cast. You were quite right to turn your back on me: no dialogue is possible between us. Our two DNAs haven't been programmed in the same way – that's all there is to it.

For it is quite a programme – to be content with bodily sensations. And it was decided before you were even born, by your heredity and by the climate. In that split second when a tropical sperm forced its way head first into the soft tropical casing of your mother's ovum, the tropics conditioned you to be happy. It is a privilege to be able to give oneself wholly to the sensation of the moment, and then, in a matter of minutes, almost before it is past, to forget it and go on to the next. A privilege that goes with being well-born, as you are, in other words born west of the Atlantic and, preferably, north of the equator. You Americans go through life like a ship ploughing through the ocean, fresh foam splashing over you time and again, washing you and freshening you up, oblivious of all the

currents, the rough seas, the wreckage that may be carried past. But what you throw back is our portion, our amniotic fluid: we splash about in it at the foetal stage, and when we are old we drown in it. We are the flotsam of the Old World.

Inadvertently – was it condescension, or sheer absence of mind? – you took me in your wake, and I laboured to row along after you: but I wasn't up to it, and before long you had left me behind as you dashed on, light and new every day. I realized that I must throw overboard all the words that had served me up to now as guideposts for living. All my ideas were upside down. I had started off all wrong – but could I change things now? You don't choose your own language, and it is not a happy position to find that yours is the wrong one, and you cannot borrow another. I complained of your coldness, your fickleness, your lies and your evasions. But what if your instant emotional responses were really a kind of versatility? Suppose what I saw as betrayal or inconsistency was simply a fresh new sincerity, unmarked by the sincerity of the previous day? Suppose it was I who was double-dealing, I who was shifty and evasive? Could it be that what I called 'love' was actually being afraid of love? That is what you were saying when you said that what I called superficiality was actually life, and my talk about 'feelings' was a refusal to live. Oh, Celia, my love, simply by giving yourself, you were giving me lessons in how to live; but one cannot be recycled merely by the process of crossing the Atlantic. The worm was in the bud. Your pupil was too far gone, an incorrigible dunce. Misiú Not-a-Hope, as Armando said.

Those 'feelings' I wallowed in and rammed down your throat – they were just another symptom of being European. The echoes left behind by a picture, a face, an encounter, that we call love, hatred, jealousy. The wad of stale tobacco that one keeps warm in one's cheek to enjoy

over again, the luxury of an old man, or one old before his time. That sort of love is for white races, people who have time to spare, time ahead and time past. Time to let things stand and sleep, separate, and release their full aroma, be it foul or fragrant. It is for people born in an old country, not one that sprang up after yesterday's shower, a country that has for ages had time to spare; where there is no rush; where we can wait for our meat to get high and our Camembert runny.

Let's face it: being Swiss, or English, or French is not a nationality: it's a syndrome. Europe is an illness, Celia. I came to you to be immunized against it, but I should have known better: it's an illness that can't be cured. I did try, though. I applied myself wholeheartedly, like a dull but plodding schoolboy. I was a cooperative patient. The moment I arrived, I gave myself up to the tumult of sight and sound, the shattering glare and noise that seemed to cut right into one's soul. The first day I thought it must be a holiday (we'd often heard talk of *la fête cubaine*) and let myself be dazzled and deafened and overwhelmed. My body underwent a certain rearrangement, a redistribution, which I vaguely felt must result either in a new and total kind of happiness or in a final and irremediable discomfort. Kill or cure. At first, like all foreigners, I put down that slight sense of unsteadiness, that faint but permanent and insidious loss of balance, to the ordinary strangeness of being in a new place. I know now that it was far more serious. That inner membrane, that impalpable but vital tissue that enables Europeans to distinguish between *inside* and *outside* – similar to the innate capacity for telling right from left and up from down – was in process of being torn to ribbons, burst like a drum. Nothing *looked* different, but everything *was*. Though it was hard to account for the dizziness and nausea I felt, they were invaluable symptoms enabling me to pinpoint the problem I had not hitherto been aware of,

underlying what passes for health in Europe, the fine balance of the sleepwalker: that way we separate indoors from outdoors, true from false, fundamental from superficial. The myth of depths to be penetrated is not a prejudice one can simply shake off: indeed it is not so much a myth as a way of life, a habit of feeling. Our European bodies make the decision for us, ahead of time: for us there will be an outside and an inside, a front we can see and a back we have to discover, a surface and an underneath. And 'feeling' is the time it takes for the echo to get to the bottom and back: the time that produces Proust's missed heartbeats, Goethe's elective affinities, more or less all the literature of the Old World. If it stopped at books, one could perhaps laugh it off. But unfortunately, it also produces millions of people who are retarded and mentally ill – above all, that rather peculiar type of patient sketched for us by Krafft-Ebing in his *Psychopathia sexualis*: the impotent obsessional.

So I was in therapy. The first six months went without a hitch. The constant use of endearments seemed to me a harmless trick of speech; the anything but cursory *abrazos* between friends no more than an exaggerated version of Mediterranean demonstrativeness; I endeavoured to see this metropolis generally as a kind of bigger and better Marseilles, a concentrated essence of Naples – only newer and clammier. Some phrases seemed especially apt: tropical exuberance, luxuriant vegetation, baroque structures, the universe of symbioses, etc. There was nothing unnatural in the sudden osmosis that removed the watertight compartments in which we kept hot separate from cold, black from white. Quite the opposite: it was restoring the real nature of things, abolishing constraints to make them simply and totally what they really were. Nature was at last set free of the enclosures, the fences, the stone walls that miserly Europe erects to separate tilled fields, countries, hearts – and bodies too. Here, in the jolting noisy

buses, the girls, chocolate, coffee and near-white, rubbing against you almost automatically, more naked than if they were actually undressed, would erase with a flick of their skirts the impassable distance that lay between you and a girl you didn't know in Europe. Nature was somehow lifted up a notch and exposed, pluperfect; gone were those dregs of half-wishes, unsatisfied longings and false shames that tinge everything we in Europe do and think with bitterness, incompleteness, repression, a sense that the party is over. The ashen tinge of our grey, inarticulate winter lives. Our cumbersome bodies, like a lot of turkeys, great fat birds that rush screaming into the stubble-fields but can't manage to fly. How marvellous to discover a New World of sun, and make a new start there: a world where declarations could be put into effect, gestures of friendship did not stop half way, and bodies were free to develop naturally, coming together and parting again joyously. All this wild energy I saw unleashed gave me no sense of outrage or excess – only of human relations that were intense, clear and well-defined, with idea leading directly to action, cause to effect, attraction to acquaintance. In a world suddenly turned right way up, I was trying to walk without losing my balance.

Not easy at first. When one has grown up in a world where everyone curls up comfortably with his own money, his little flat, his TV and his car, to see such a breaking-down of barriers is absolutely mind-blowing. It takes time to adjust. In fact, at first you don't like it. I've known communist militants at home who wouldn't lend their car to their best friend. (They would also be unlikely to want to give their life for the Revolution, I daresay, especially in a foreign country.) So you can imagine how amazed I was to find people who barely knew one another borrowing each other's cars and returning them – as they might pass across the wine-bottle or the evening paper – and not inspecting the coachwork afterwards with a

magnifying glass in case there might be a scratch on the wing, or a dent on the bumper. One cannot take it in just at first. People who don't say *my* house, *my* toothbrush, *my* wife, and don't go purple (or green) in the face when they find someone else has used one of *their* possessions. It was crazy! What a generous, broadminded, joyful way of living with people – it seemed too good to be true, after the first shock.

Having made such a good start, I seemed well on the way to a cure. But you know what happened. You brought the inflammation to a head. You cleansed the area to be operated on. You precipitated the inevitable. There was a darker underside to this happy picture, and you unintentionally revealed it to me. Wonderful as it was to live so openly, I had imagined that there would be a few areas of privacy we could keep to ourselves. The torn membrane I spoke of just now exists only in our minds. But you also find in every house in Europe a certain wall – of bricks and etiquette – round people's private lives: a block of flats does not instantly develop into a commune.

Do you remember our first attempt at living together? Such a cosy little home we had – nothing could have been more normal. It was at a moment when the great cry in the Party was for 'proletarianization of cadres', 'involvement of militants in the life of ordinary people', 'getting the Party onto the shop floor', and heaven knows what else that ran counter to the most elementary rules of security. It was also the time when you were learning to handle cameras, to develop microfilm and all that. So you had all the gear of an aspiring professional photographer, and also, I imagine (though you never told me any details), photocopies of internal documents, records, and probably pictures of military objectives – banks seen from inside and out, suspicious vehicles, certain police officers and so on. You spent hours shut up in our bathroom-turned-lab, with your cameras and rolls of film, lamps and tanks of

solution. But, though you could shut the bathroom door, you couldn't shut the outside door onto the landing: the neighbours opposite would have been most offended if they hadn't been able to come in and out when they felt like it. After a week of this, I complained that it was like living in a goldfish-bowl, but you couldn't imagine what I meant. The gossiping housewives in the building began to think we were at home an awful lot for a couple of photographic reporters. One or another of them seemed to be in our sitting-room all day, as if they had worked out some kind of rota. And the family above us had their dinner on the balcony, and every evening they would shout down to ask for some salt, or a drop of oil. Nothing could be closed. In fact I've never seen windows covered in any way here. No shutters, no curtains. Only occasionally venetian blinds, which don't keep the light out, but only soften it a bit. As for people's love-lives, well, they might as well have been in the street for all the difference it made. Anyway, thanks to you, I discovered that in this part of the world, a block of flats like ours was a single living organism, and all the tenants interdependent organs. I continued to protest, but this urban version of the 'universe of symbioses' would have gone on being quite natural and tolerable to you until, one fine day, the neighbour's son came and took a shower in our bathroom when we were out. You hadn't locked the door. This was more than intolerable – it was dangerous. We went the next day, leaving no forwarding address: alone for once.

From then on, we looked upon the caravanserai around us with a different eye. You were watchful for strictly practical, security reasons. But I felt an uneasiness, almost a homesickness for the enclosed surroundings I grew up in, the valleys of my youth. The extraordinary rawness of human relations in your country caused a kind of delayed reaction in me. When your countrymen want to pass the

time of day they don't just speak: they yell. I've noticed, too, that though they shout, they aren't rude to each other, or only rarely. They seem to by-pass that intermediate stage we prolong indefinitely (but then, it would be hard for them to raise their voices much higher!) and move straight on to fisticuffs. A way of gaining time, you'll say. The fight that would signify the end of a friendship with us is more like the preamble to one here. Two men will come to blows one night, and next day they'll welcome each other with open arms, and go drinking together as though nothing had happened. Then again, people don't just *drink* here; they get drunk. At once, without wasting any time. Such everyday scenes are as it were the small change of a nature racing to achieve its ends. The violence between men (and it is even worse between men and women) may well be the corollary of a magnificent health I have simply never experienced. The nature of my childhood functioned at a different pace, and it is that nature whose laws I cannot but obey. I learnt as a child to conform to the half-tones, the subtleties, the *chiaroscuro* of autumn; to those decadent middle courses, those evasions, those feints you so despise; to those colours like rust, pastel, leaf-brown, mud, that you haven't even got words for. Your DNA imposes on you a law of black and white, all or nothing, now or never. When rain falls from your sky it is never a drizzle or a shower, but a deluge. When you picture a fern you see a tree – I see a plant in a pot. Your cactus-seeds either die or become great candelabra the size of Gothic cathedrals. Where we have frail acacias, you have great flamboyants; the delicate honeysuckle twining round our country cottages turns here into a strident purple Bougainvillia; our virginal lilies become the scarlet orchids whose wild flames twist up your mountainsides and along your motorways. I'm not saying I dislike the gigantic boastfulness of everything tropical. I'm not saying your plants have gone wrong. It's just that things

that seem to start the same end up so very different in our two worlds.

So, it's not that I blame you; indeed, I must thank you for having destroyed my illusions and restored my sense of proportion. It is obvious that in such a world, under such a sky, politicians must play for a quick win: double or quits. It was naïve of me to use the word 'opportunism' for that swirling vitality that makes you instinctively go for the winning number and forget your previous choices. It is simply your way of saving time. With us politics is a cautious game: we never stake too much at a time. For you, making the Revolution is all or nothing. Any victory later than tomorrow – tomorrow morning, really tonight, in other words – is an uninteresting chimera. I can still see their faces in the Front when I (admittedly a nobody from nowhere) reminded them of the Long Marches in other countries, of the patient building up of Parties in the past, of complex strategies planned over decades, with no certainty of success. All this is absolutely entrancing to the European intelligentsia (and keeps them busy, never a dull moment) but it would never cut any ice here. Not because of the uncertainty: that you rather like. But putting down your money today, and coming back in thirty years' time to see where the ball has stopped – that's just plain silly!

My political vocabulary is drawn from our agriculture, operating as it does on land that is exhausted, subject to those cycles of waiting, those rhythms and rituals of human expectation known as ploughing, manuring, sowing, hoeing, harvesting. Such painstaking operations are quite foreign to you. You just make a hole in the ground and let the dollars spurt out in sticky black oil. You haven't even the patience to sow wheat. Perhaps it isn't risky enough for you? Whatever the reason, you make your bread with imported flour – risky indeed when the flour comes from the United States. The other day, Carlet (the French journalist) said to me: 'We're descended from

monkeys, but we took our time about it. The monkeys here have come straight down from the trees to the driving-seats of their Cadillacs.' I know that's a commonplace among reactionaries, especially foreigners who sell Cadillacs, or who defend the interests of the people who sell Cadillacs (which Carlet does). But all the same, please don't be in such a hurry. Stop a while on the way. Take the time to waste some time. It may prove easier to slide off the branch of a rubber-tree onto a car-seat than to switch from the regime of an agricultural petty tyrant (the shrewdest cattle-man, the first off his horse at the steps of the presidential palace) to proletarian democracy.

Sorry about the sermon. The trouble is that we like imposing our own Calvary on other people; on our side of the Atlantic we should be quite disgusted if your coup were to succeed with fewer than eighty million deaths, or in less than ten centuries.

Oh, Celia, the therapy has failed: the basic problem is that I am a European – I've got no choice. You have been present at every phase of my non-cure, and watched the old gangrene gradually creeping back. You may even have found it painful (though you said nothing) to find we could no more be matched together than a banana-leaf and a bit of dead willow. It certainly hasn't been pleasant for me either. There was nothing I could get a grip on: all the people and the things around me seemed to have become blank polished surfaces, enamelled walls which the sun marbled in shifting patterns like watered silk. It was no use your arguing – trying to convince me that women haven't got an inside and an outside, that there is nothing more behind the doors than there is in front, that it was ridiculous to try to get to the bottom of things, because things have no bottom.

I am forced to conclude that we are what we are from the beginning, even though one may have to wait till the end to find it out. And the fact is, Celia, that I felt, if you'll

excuse my saying so, that I had lost something by losing what was inside (like one of those houses you have over here that never really become 'homes', though their patios are delightful). I missed the kind of people I knew as a child, people with concealed depths like our false-bottomed suitcases, bodies with souls, days with twilights. I missed the world I had left, where every light always had its shadow, every idea its complexities; where life was always more than met the eye.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

'Well, tell Señor Tinoco to call me himself. I'm extremely busy, and I haven't got time to —'

'He isn't very well. It's about the yacht *Ulysses* he ordered from you last August.' Frank savoured the pleasure, prolonging it. He was in control of the situation this time. For the moment.

'Do you still want the duralinox mast?' the voice asked with some hesitation.

'I've heard that Burma teak is better value for money,' Frank responded smartly.

'I'm very glad to hear that! At long last!' The tone had changed, and was now cordial, almost effusive. 'We were a bit worried.'

'So were we.'

'But I was in touch with a lady the other evening, at my house — a friend of Señor Tinoco's I understand — delightful young lady. Unfortunately we only had a short time to talk — but it was most pleasant.' The bastard. The filthy bastard. 'You know her, I presume?'

'Slightly. Not well —' Frank stammered. He hadn't been expecting this. Then, more curtly, 'But it's I who'll be dealing with this from now on. No one else is in a position to.' Celia did know 'Ulysses' in fact, but not the second password about the metal mast.

'My friend and I are planning the dates for our cruise. I take it we can count on the work being done by the time you said?'

'Well, you know, it's a very large order. But I've got some good news to pass on. Where shall we meet? I don't think my office is really convenient.' They ought to have had their talk in a car, with another car following to cover them. But that would take time to arrange. 'What about my seaside villa? We won't be disturbed there.'

'Fine.'

Frank was certainly taking a risk, but Rossi's hands were tied at present. The money paid in Geneva could not go into his numbered account till they had sent the bank a coded telegram acknowledging receipt of the merchandise in a satisfactory condition. Normal business practice.

'Giani, my chauffeur, will pick you up tomorrow at the Sheraton bar. Four p.m., if that suits you.'

'No: I'll wait just off the entry to the Eastern highway. Same time.'

'Oh, old boy, you're making a mistake. You'd be much more comfortable in the Sheraton, you really would -'

'No, there's no mistake. The name is Dalton.'

'All right then, Mr Dalton. I look forward to meeting you.'

Frank was silent, just long enough for the polite rejoinder he left unmade; then he hung up.

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A great black bird circled round in a sky the colour of concrete. The pestilential smog was gilded only faintly by the sun in the west, a sun like a wide stain of light being gradually mopped up by the swirling smoke and vapour. Like the side of a crater, high flames leaping up everywhere: the refuse lying all around was invisible beneath the volcanic puffing of smoke in the thundery gloom. The clouds were boiling up, purple and black.

Sparks rose into the heavy air like swarms of dragon-flies. The vulture circled down, its wings extended, gliding; then, lowering claws almost as long as itself, it came to earth noiselessly at Frank's feet and retracted its landing-gear. From this *rancho* a hundred yards above the motor-way, Frank could watch the cars without being seen. The refuse-dump supported two thousand families: they had taken possession of a rubbish-mine. Great white heaps of ash and mountains of waste stretched as far as the eye could see: wrapping paper and cardboard boxes, bottles, plastic bags, enamel pans and bowls, the stripped and gaping skeletons of old cars. Masses of tiny dark creatures swarmed round the most recently arrived piles, coal-black silhouettes, shadowy beings, hungry and sooty. On coming nearer, one could identify three competing species: vultures, dogs and human children. Opposite, along the road, the tip-lorries came one after another to deposit their loads. Refuse-workers in oilskins used long rakes to help get the stuff out, and bulldozers immediately pushed it back up towards the top of the heaps.

The children were the first to get into each new truck-load, fighting their way in with enthusiasm; but as they emerged with their spoils, the vultures and dogs made a rush at them, pushing them, knocking them over, and making off with the booty. All around was the acrid smell of burning – burnt tyres, burnt fat – punctuated by the occasional sickly whiff of decomposing organic matter. The birds had the advantage in point of numbers. They came in their hundreds, wheeling round in the air, or perching in serried ranks like undertakers' men on the burnt stumps of long-dead trees, seeming to watch all this foolish excitement without interest. Then, suddenly, they would fly up together, in response to some invisible signal. Each putting out two long, spindly, clawed feet, they would swoop round slowly, heavily, above the *mêlée*; then each would pick out here or there some carrion –

the little bloody, limp, purplish jelly, still quivering in the wind, that was all that was left of a starving dog, the guts of a donkey, an old man who was run over, an aborted foetus, or perhaps even one of themselves. Unhurriedly, perching above it, each would guard its ration of food jealously with enfolding wings. It was done with an almost maternal tenderness, like a hen brooding over this thing, half-flesh, half-food, this placenta of both birth and death. Of all these carnivores fighting for survival, the birds were the most dignified – and the most silent. They were also the only bipeds: for the small human beings crawled awkwardly on all fours as they splashed about in the rubble. The birds had only to lower their heads to forage, to excavate and tear with their beaks. The children threw themselves greedily and bodily onto the spoils, while the dogs seemed content to leap about barking without making any real effort; perhaps they preferred to do their scavenging by night. A lot of kids, recognizing their disadvantage as against the vultures, overcame it by equipping themselves with a kind of hooked lance, a long stick with a curved end, which they used to harpoon bits of food that they could then put into a sack on their shoulders. Some, clad only in shorts, but with rope-soled shoes to protect their feet from the tins and broken glass, were not scavenging at all, but just played amid the garbage, doing headstands, seeing who could stay upside down the longest. Perhaps they were the replacement team. Further up the hill, the mothers waited by their braziers for the ingredients of the family dinner.

A white Ford Mustang appeared at the corner of the road, turned off to the side and stopped beside a bulldozer. Frank hurried down the mountain of refuse: the car didn't appear to be being followed, and the driver was alone in it. Half way down, on a level bit of ground, there was a great uproar going on around something: he couldn't at first see what it was. He elbowed his way through and

found a legless adolescent in a red sweatshirt sitting, or rather set down, on a wheeled wooden board. He was whirling round in the centre of a circle of some thirty kids, keeping them at a respectful distance with a long wooden lance gripped in his armpit (one of his arms was also missing), twirling it round with amazing dexterity. He could move, and make sudden half-turns on his platform, a rectangular box hardly any wider than his pelvis, by pivoting on his right hand. Though his head was no higher than the waists of his tormentors, he could brush their faces with his hooked lance, and was managing somehow to defend himself on all sides at once. He had a sack grasped between his stumps of thighs, and it seemed to be this treasure that he was trying to protect. Nothing could be heard but his heavy breathing broken by little cries of anger, the squeaking of the wheels, and the swishing of the stick through the air. Frank wondered what he could possibly have found or stolen that could arouse so much passion or covetousness in the ruffians all round him. He tried to intervene, shouting quite loudly, but no one listened. They pushed him away and kicked him: he was an alien, with a white skin, and rich man's clothes. He gave up the attempt, and continued on his way to the car. The man at the wheel, who had been watching the scene, smiled at him. 'Mr Dalton?'

'Giani?'

'There's nothing you can do; they're only teasing him now, but it won't be long before they kill him.' The chauffeur wore a navy blue uniform that could have been an ordinary Sunday suit; his delicate mulatto's head was crowned with gleaming hair, and his sideboards went down to his chin. He was about to get out and open the back door, but Frank stopped him, and got into the front seat beside him.

'I like Buñuel, but only in the cinema,' he muttered. 'Have we far to go?'

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The polished wooden door opened noiselessly; the chauffeur stood aside and then departed on tiptoe. Facing Frank, inside the ship's cabin, a bald man sat behind a mahogany desk, his head in his hands. From two vast speakers facing each other across the little room came the cascading notes of a harp, crystalline, the music of the spheres. The stereophonic effect struck Frank strangely. He felt like an astronaut suddenly transported into the interstellar space of this cabin-cum-office where an old mariner sat, so transfixed by the music that he did not even raise his eyes. The door closed with a faint click, and Rossi lifted his head; he looked neither surprised nor annoyed, but commanded silence with a finger to his lips. He looked straight at Frank without seeing him, as if he were the back of the man in front of him at a concert. His eyes were amazingly clear.

Frank took advantage of this enforced period of contemplation to study the room. The desk was covered in telescopes, sextants and little models of old-fashioned ships - brigantines, schooners, turn-of-the-century paddle-steamers. In the corners and on the walls were copper ships' lights, boarding swords and navigation charts. Everything was scrubbed and rubbed and polished; the wood shone. If there had only been portholes, you'd have thought you really were on board ship. But the blue-green water visible through the closed window, rippling and flecked with shadow, was only the opalescent rectangle of a swimming pool, looking, in the December breeze, rather like the Mediterranean. The sea was a stone's throw away, just beneath this promontory, on which an Italian flag flew to indicate the owner's presence. The captain seated before him wore a blazer with brass buttons in lieu of uniform. The music stopped. Now it was the silence that seemed to vibrate like a stringed instrument. Rossi

subsided once again into a trance. Frank wished he could go home.

Someone had told him, he now remembered, that Rossi would lock himself in and play the cello in his spare time, yet he still found the man a total surprise. His face was very red (whether from alcohol or the sun), his features strong and regular, his gaze direct and unafraid. At last the record stopped turning, and he at once rose and came forward smiling, his hand held out. He was shorter than Frank, thick-set and athletic-looking, with more of the peasant about him than the aristocrat. But it seemed that the surprise was not all on Frank's side.

'I knew you were a music-lover,' said Frank, feeling awkward, 'but I'd no idea you were as dedicated as this.'

'And I expected you to be young – but you're a mere child!' said his host affably, trying to put him at his ease.

'I wouldn't have disturbed you, but I was shown in. That was Verdi's *Otello*, wasn't it?

'Yes indeed. There *is* only one *Otello* – I don't count the Rossini. You must admit one would die of boredom if one heard nothing but the fairground music they go in for in this country. But we can talk French if you'd rather, Mr Dalton. You're Swiss, I believe?'

'You have got a good ear!'

'You needn't be quite so complimentary – my colleagues have told me about you.' Rossi had switched from Spanish to French with complete ease, and with only the faintest Italian intonation. Knowing him to be an Italian, and titled, with suspicions of swindling and sharp business practice floating in his mind, Frank had expected someone tall and thin, with shifty eyes, crinkly hair, olive complexion, and an elegance bordering on vulgarity. He was quite unprepared for this broad-shouldered muscular fellow who now looked him so straight in the eye. People can be disconcerting at times: here was an Italian with

German eyes, a count built like a weight-lifter, a peasant whose aesthetic transports seemed quite genuine. 'Another of my cardboard cut-outs,' thought Frank. 'There's no one who isn't better when you see them in the flesh.' He almost felt as though he should be making the man an apology. Now, as always, his initial mistrust was transformed into a naïve friendliness.

'You certainly like ships,' he said, feeling he must say something. He pointed to a model of a three-master.

'Well, as you probably know, I was a corvette commander during the war. It's a family tradition; my father was in the navy too.'

'And why did you give it all up - your job, the navy, your country?'

'There's not much for a sailor to do when he's had to scuttle his ship because his country's lost the war - except perhaps go into yacht-building. I got fed up at home, so I decided to settle here.'

'So the catamaran is the continuation of the warship by other means?'

'Absolutely not!' said Rossi, laughing at Frank's sally. 'The war's over and done with. Times have changed, and I've changed with them. Nothing wrong with that, is there?'

Frank noticed a framed photograph hanging on the wall near Rossi. It was a three-quarter face of an officer, with a prominent nose, and narrowed eyes shaded by the peak of his cap. The eagle on the cap was more reminiscent of the Third Reich than the American eagle (though one empire is much like another); there was something familiar, yet Frank couldn't quite place the officer in the wide-collared leather coat, with the thin white scarf -

'It's Rommel,' said Rossi, seeing his puzzlement. 'I'm sorry if that shocks you. He was an old friend of my father's, and I met him in Libya when I was young. He was first and foremost a soldier, remember. Of course, his

ideas were totally misplaced. Politics was the undoing of us all.'

('That's what carelessness does,' thought Frank, coming to himself with a start. How could he have settled into this friendly chat, as though he had dropped in for a cup of tea in between two sides of *Otello*?)

'I've come a long way,' continued Rossi, holding out his hands in a gesture of ironic helplessness. 'A lot of water has gone under the bridge since Tobruk.'

'I think we have rather more pressing matters to discuss – don't let's waste too much time.'

'A drink? Whisky?'

'No thanks. I don't want to interrupt your concert. There are four acts in *Otello*, aren't there? That wasn't the end.'

'Don't worry. I know how it ends.'

'Are you sure? Perhaps one day Desdemona won't die.'

'My dear fellow: operas have certain requirements, just like life – except that in real life the unhappy endings aren't beautiful.'

Rossi turned out to be far easier to deal with than Frank had expected. He seemed to be presenting apologies rather than further conditions. Not a word of increased freight costs, or the risks involved, or the demands of associates. Frank began to wonder if he could ask for compensation for the delays they had been subjected to. The original plan had been for the cargo to be shipped at Genoa, with an import permit for Trinidad. But some last-minute red tape had made it necessary to change all this, and Frank had thought it more tactful not to insist on having the details of this explained. In the end they had decided to ship it at Antwerp, taking advantage of a cargo of machine-tools and boilers going to Bridgetown, equipment bought in Belgium by the Barbados Sugar Company to modernize their old sugar refineries. Rossi's friends had seized this windfall, and persuaded the importers to re-export five thousand tons of 'sugar' to this country as

part of the same contract. An ingenious arrangement. The cargo was now at sea off St Lucia, and would be delivered at the arranged spot in a couple of weeks; it was hard to give a precise date because of the uncertainties in Barbados.

Of course, Rossi was no longer responsible for anything after delivery: that was when the contract ended. 'Anyone can *buy* arms – that's not the problem. What is difficult is to get them delivered to you, and then transport them to where they're needed.' But that wasn't his worry. He would do the best he could for them, because he liked what they were trying to do: young countries were right to want their freedom – like Italy in the days of Mazzini and Garibaldi; and D'Annunzio was another friend of his father's (they had been together at Fiume). So he was prepared to reduce his profit margin to the irreducible minimum, and abandon all talk of danger money. Contrary to what he had given Señor Tinoco to understand through that attractive young lady who had been so friendly. ^

One final point: his last and only request: 'I must ask you not to let people know the special prices I'm giving you. Otherwise every liberation movement on the continent will be demanding the same reductions, and I'll be ruined!'

'Now don't let's exaggerate,' cut in Frank. 'At first you were asking fifty dollars for a Beretta nine-millimetre automatic. Not much less than Garcia in New York.'

'But of course, my 'ear fellow! As the authorized Beretta dealer, I'm bound to stick to the maker's official price. But on all the other things we can come to an agreement. You're not much interested in revolvers anyway, are you?'

'No more than you are. They're something we can help ourselves to – for free.'

'Well, yes. But when you disarm a policeman, he gives you his Browning minus the accessories. All the bits and pieces we supply our customers with for nothing – spare

magazine, cleaning brush, instruction handbook in Spanish. And with our rifles – a sling, a bayonet, cleaning equipment. I don't really have to advertise our service to you –'

'No, Count. You can leave that to your salesmen.'

'In point of fact,' continued Rossi, becoming serious again, 'I wondered if you might be interested in Kalachnikovs or Tokarevs? Apart from what's on the way, I mean. I've got a consignment available at the moment.'

'No thanks. As you know, that'd be anything but ideal politically. And if we did need them, we wouldn't want to get involved with Omnipol –'

'Do you really think the Czechs – meaning of course the Russians – would take that risk?'

'No, but others might do it for them if they got the chance.'

'If they haven't already done it.'

'I don't know what you mean by that. Government propaganda perhaps? They invent a Cuban arms landing about once a month.'

'And fifty per cent of the time they're right –'

'Now, Count, you know as well as I do that the solidarity of the Cubans is basically political and moral.'

'Save that for someone else, Mr Dalton!' Rossi smiled wryly. The subject clearly interested him, and he would have liked to linger on it. But Frank wanted to say as little as possible, just enough to make it clear that they had other ways of getting what they needed, in case. . . 'I must admit', Rossi went on, 'that operations on a large scale like this are – or could be – pretty difficult now. Every bit of the coast is under surveillance. Every vessel from the West is hailed; every fishing boat is checked; there's a total blockade.'

'Don't worry. Nature does wonderful things in the Caribbean. Think of the coconut – absolutely watertight, yet you find a litre of milk inside it!'

His offer of Kalachnikovs was not so much a feeler as a provocation. Rossi was playing a somewhat tricky game. He was torn between wanting to show that international aid had become altogether too risky, thus strengthening his hand as a seller, and wanting to force Frank into an admission that they were still receiving such aid. It was hard to be sure what he was getting at. On his side, Frank must tell him enough to make him realize he was not indispensable and had no monopoly, but no more – for evidently he was in touch with ‘the other side’. This game was also part of the deal.

In point of fact, they had as yet only a few samples of socialist military equipment. Andrés and his lieutenants in the *sierra* had their AKs – the finest automatic rifle in the world, light and easy to handle, and made (thank heaven) by the Russians. It was ideal for guerrilla conditions; with its ultra-short barrel and its concave thirty-shot magazine, it could be carried in a sling against the belly, like a sub-machine-gun. Very much better than the Belgian FAL – but not for display, alas! A few comrades in the city had Makarovs with detachable butts (the only .45 revolver that could fire a volley), another miracle of Soviet technology. But these were things only presented by and to the élite – like the swords bestowed on the knights of old when they were going off on a crusade to fight the infidel.

‘No, Señor Rossi, we are definitely not interested in your offer.’

Rossi withdrew without further argument. Payment would be made on delivery, then, in cash, with nothing in writing. The delivery itself was not Rossi’s business, but would be arranged by his underlings. The spot they’d chosen was quite safe, and the ship would not have to depart from its planned commercial itinerary at all; the engines would merely stop for an hour or two to give the boats time to get to the shore and back.

In high good humour, Rossi ordered a bottle of champagne to celebrate the conclusion of their negotiations. Like notaries do at home, thought Frank, when a transaction has gone well – except that they use ordinary sparkling wine, whereas here the butler brought a bottle of Dom Perignon, and cut-glass champagne goblets.

‘Have you always been interested in guns?’ he asked.

‘I’ve collected them since I was in my twenties,’ said Rossi. ‘My connexion with Beretta built up over the years. But I’m not strictly speaking an arms dealer, as you might think. Let’s say I like to make myself useful.’

‘A philanthropist?’

‘Well, that’s not as unlikely as it sounds. I wouldn’t like to be poor, I must admit. But I could live quite comfortably on my boat business if I had to.’

‘And where do you keep your gun collection? In the holds of your ships?’

‘You don’t believe me, do you? Come this way.’ And Rossi stood up and went to a tiny lock set into the wall, a door Frank had not even noticed. It opened into a large room with no windows, pitch dark and smelling of pine and rifle-oil. Rossi turned on the light. ‘This is something I only show to friends. So you can consider yourself one of them.’

‘I’m sure good customers are allowed to see it from time to time as well, aren’t they?’

‘Ah, you think of nothing but business. People like you are really too materialistic for my liking. I shouldn’t have shown you my little museum at all.’

It wasn’t so much a museum as an arsenal. Or at least a war museum, but not the kind with blunderbusses and pearl-handled pistols. Modern war. Real war. Infantry war. In an area of less than a hundred square yards, here were all the light arms of the West. The room was not unlike a gymnasium, but instead of apparatus the walls were lined with wooden racks.

'I see you keep it up to date.'

The exhibition was arranged from left to right, starting with ancient Springfields and Mausers from the turn of the century, and ending with a modern Armalite M16 with a sight incorporated in its carrying handle. Frank turned from one to the next, with the delighted curiosity of a child in a toyshop at Christmas time. 'What's this?' he asked, pointing to a rifle of a type he had never seen before, with a round breech-block.

'Made in Santo Domingo, gas-operated, twenty cartridges, .30 calibre,' replied Rossi with the flat precision of a washing-machine salesman.

'Did you buy it?'

'No, it was a present from Trujillo.' And sure enough, the handle bore the benefactor's coat of arms, and underneath it the date: 2-7-54. 'It's a small world. In this business you give and you receive.'

Lovingly, Rossi caressed his trophies one by one.

'Look, a Schmeisser! What do you think of that? No one's made a better gun since.' He unfolded the metal shoulder-piece of the German Tommy gun, the weapon issued to Wehrmacht paratroopers. 'The fastest in the world – still is. In one minute you can fire four – even five – clips of thirty cartridges!'

Suddenly he closed the breech, raised the gun to his shoulder and set it against his cheek; then he aimed. Was he a collector, or was he sick? Or was he just a fascist seized with nostalgia?

'You've forgotten the magazine,' Frank pointed out politely.

Rossi gave a start, then burst out laughing: 'You *are* observant. They're a special kind of nine-millimetre – hard to get hold of.'

'This one isn't bad either,' said Frank, taking down a well-oiled Sten. 'But I don't think you care so much for English guns.'

'Unhappy memories,' said Rossi shortly, frowning. 'Put it back.'

'They say it's very efficient. That's what the Resistance had when they parachuted them in, wasn't it? In fact, wasn't it one of those that got Heydrich?'

'Now, now, let's be accurate. If I remember rightly, the terrorist's Sten jammed just as he was about to fire, and he was only saved because his accomplice threw a hand-grenade.'

'Terrorist? You mean Czech patriot, don't you? The Nazis lost the war, remember!'

'Well they were a funny lot of Czechs – all "made in England". They took their orders from London, you know. I don't suppose you were even born then, but I was in uniform.'

'They say the same about us – that we get our orders from Havana. But that doesn't mean that the people in our National Liberation Front aren't patriots. There's such a thing as international solidarity now, and there was then – it doesn't regard frontiers or the rules and regulations of diplomacy.'

'I don't deny it.'

What was the use of making speeches? Was Havana the London of the war now spreading underground and undermining an entire continent? Maybe it was. But Cuba was certainly not England.

'Isn't it a bit unusual for a music-lover to be so much involved with arms?' Frank found it quite hard to realize that the ecstatic face he had seen earlier on was the same as the flushed and contorted one he had glimpsed in the few seconds when the gun-fanatic took over.

'How do you mean?'

'Well, the pizzicati of *Otello* are a rather different sound from the rattling of a machine-gun –'

'How rigid you are, my dear fellow. A good ear is a good ear. I was brought up on Schubert and Mozart and Verdi,

and it's precisely because of that that I can recognize a make of gun blindfold, just from the sound it makes.'

'Good Lord! You're not going to tell me you can tell the difference between two guns of the same calibre! Can you tell a Thompson from an M3?'

'Try me! One of these days we'll experiment – but not here. This villa is too peaceful to be turned into a firing range. I don't know if we'll ever meet again, but if we do, we'll have a bet on it.'

'Okay,' said Frank, laughing. 'I'll shoot, and you stand near by with your back turned.'

'Just as long as you don't use a silencer, Mr Dalton. . . But seriously, I imagine you have a pretty low view of me, but –'

'No, no. Let's just say our values are different. That's all.'

'They call us "death merchants". But you know music sends people into the other world as well. When I listen to the Toccata and Fugue in D I feel as though I'd gone down into the family vault.'

Oddly enough, Frank had at times had a sense of brooding over his own death when fully abandoning himself to music – to the Toccata in D, say, or the Overture to Don Giovanni. The annihilation wrought by sound seemed to encompass all other forms of annihilation too.

'But you don't stay down there for long,' he said. 'Only a little while ago you were listening to Verdi, but you didn't die of it. Concert tickets take you there *and* back – whereas a bullet is strictly a one-way trip!'

'Oh, indeed. But I wonder what use it is to shoot people if their souls have to keep coming back. Do you believe in reincarnation? How can we be sure this dog of mine wasn't once in the Afrika Korps? Perhaps he got a bullet in the brain at Alamein.'

Frank started. A brown and black Alsatian had followed them noiselessly into the room and was sniffing at his legs, teeth bared.

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Do you remember the evening you came home so dishevelled from that meeting? There were lots of meetings, of course, but that one was special. I wasn't even supposed to know who had been there, much less what you had decided. No wonder: it was nothing less than the plan for the members of the political bureau in San Antonio prison to escape. Joaquim in other words. Felipe was there (the acting military secretary), Costa, the Greek who'd been chosen to run the wine-shop they were going to set up, the two Party militants who were to dig the tunnel, and yourself, the go-between. (As you see, I know all about it, though it was supposed to be such a secret!) Not that it hurts to talk about it now – the police have killed most of them by this time. It was an internal Party matter, so all the more reason to keep me out of it. (The Rossi business, on the other hand, I *was* dealing with, at least for a time.) A house had been found and a lease signed allowing for the ground floor to be used as a grocery-shop cum bar. It would be a real service to the officers and men of the garrison which was just across the road (What luck! they thought). So, a start having been made, you were now planning the next step. You expected the tunnel to take six months (yes, all the facts come out in time), which was a wildly over-optimistic estimate. Alas, there was no geologist at your meeting, armed with a sample of the subsoil. You were sure Joaquim could wait another six months – unless, of course, he were to be transferred, a possibility like a sword of Damocles over the head of every prisoner in the world. The plan was no use of course, but that is the whole point of plans: they prove that no one could have foreseen what they in fact failed to foresee. However, you didn't know that at the time. And I knew nothing about any of it.

I had never seen you so radiant as you were that evening,

when you came back to the apartment whistling triumphantly. You were quite talkative (not about that, of course), teasing me, and even glancing at what I was writing in my notebook. You had never before shown any interest in the notes that, as the adventurer-clerk I was, I so carefully kept. Your interest didn't last long. By the time I'd read you three sentences you'd started to yawn. Then you spun round on your toes, and clapped your hands: *Ole!* Why don't we go to the cinema, Professor?' A staggering concession! So off we went, arm in arm, to the local Ateneo, where they were showing, if I remember rightly, *Rio Bravo*. But we didn't stay to the end: you couldn't stand all the sententious moralizing, John Wayne with his ugly face, and that Mexican barman, the voluble little grotesque that is every western's stereotype of Mexicans. 'Despicable Yankees!' you spluttered, as we went out. And to make it worse, it was dubbed into Spanish. Dubbing has the unfortunate effect with any film of turning it into a caricature of itself: it takes away all the nuances that make it unique, and reduces it to an example of a *genre* by superimposing upon it all the conventions of that *genre*. However, an Italian restaurant put you into a good humour again. You ate your way through two huge pizzas in succession.

'Bad westerns make you hungry then?'

'No. It's the kind of work we do. I'm eating now to make up for what I won't get tomorrow. One has to be prepared – you never know when privations are coming.'

'Sexual privations included,' you might have added; the hope of seeing Joaquim again also made you want to make love that evening. But five minutes later you were up, as distant as ever, wearing nothing but a towel round your waist because of the heat, but dignified in spite of your bare breasts. You sat at the table as stiff as a poker. I might not have even been in the room. You frowned, as you opened out your accordion file of index-cards giving

the formulae for explosives and incendiary mixtures. Conscientiously you recited your lesson. Indeed there was almost a sense of nostalgia about it, as though you were recapturing your interrupted schooldays. Having had to leave school at fifteen because of the Revolution, you were now reciting your chemical declensions as we used to recite *mensa* and *magister* in Latin class: amatolites, chloratites, amonalites, dinamonites. Always in the same order. The order of decreasing explosiveness, you explained. I thought it was all a bit academic. The Party was re-training its cadres, and the programme was evidently going at a fast pace. Unless you were purposely misleading me – for after all, you were hardly going to make your tunnel under the military prison with dynamite! Nitrate of ammonia 85 per cent, powdered aluminium 15 per cent: pause. Nitrate of ammonia 84.5 per cent, powdered aluminium 13 per cent, soot 1.5 per cent, engine oil 1 per cent: pause. And so on. The first declension, the amatolites, ended rather oddly, I seem to remember, with ‘ground coffee 7 per cent’. Never use metal containers, you said, and especially never trust the American brands Montana and Lane, which give very poor results. I pointed out that in the nature of the case one could hardly expect American chemicals firms to make it easier for us in the Front to cause explosions that would blow up, among other things, the Montana and Lane agencies in this country. But you insisted that this was just one further proof of imperialist wickedness. Then the dialogue stopped, as you moved on to liquid explosives, your favourites.

What seemed to me more reasonable, though less innocent, was your passion for collecting broken toys, plastic combs, brooches, old film. With praiseworthy economy you would amass the most varied bits and pieces, which other comrades would grind down, sprinkle with a little potassium permanganate, and do up neatly in waterproof wrapping – the parcels to be deposited under-

neath the cars of the American diplomatic corps. For two pins you'd have burgled the local film library (not that it was terribly well stocked) in emulation of your friends who stole all that film-stock from the Paramount offices. We both loved the cinema, you and I, but for very different reasons. You, the materialist, when you spoke of 'films' thought at once of cellulose acetate, the finest of all ingredients for an incendiary cocktail. For you, film represented as convenient a component as any to mix with this or that oxidant, in order to convert some embassy councillor into raspberry jam. But for me, haunted as I was by the ghosts of another world, the cinema was where I went to smoke my Swiss opium in the darkness, to forget the existence of the CIA, to slip away for an hour or two into a world of Technicolor illusions, in which the real police, and our bombs, and Rossi's elusive cargo all vanished behind the explosions and manhunts of the silver screen.

Much as I admired your ability to turn your attention so instantaneously from sex to your list of explosives, I could not help mourning the departure of the maenad I had seen a moment before, with her lips drawn back over her sharp teeth in a convulsion of pleasure. But now, as I watched this convent girl sitting so upright on her chair, hair held back by a couple of pins, I ceased to wonder which of the two was the real Celia. That evening, I suddenly understood that the reason the maenad and the strait-laced student were so totally, so resolutely, separate was that you had too much to fear from their meeting. The reason you always avoided my eye after making love was because I was a still-surviving witness who could testify that you and your enemy were one and the same person. The very thought that the militant and the lover – but no, 'lover' is too high-flown a word; better to say the sexual partner, or perhaps just the open vagina, for I refer only to the actual mechanism of copulation, the vital minimum that

constitutes the sexual act, no more – the very suggestion that the politico-military cadre and the gloriously sexual woman could be of one substance in you would have appalled you. Yes, it was that evening, though I did not then know anything about your meeting, that I came to suspect that I should have to go. That otherwise you would start to hate me. I disgusted you because my very presence obliged you to feel that disgust with yourself that you had resolved never to feel – even in its most conventional and basically absurd form of the *animal post coitum tristis*.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

There was uncertainty on the Stock Exchange today, following reports of an attack on a police commissioner, a well-known torture expert. The decline in rural guerrilla stocks was halted, and there was a slight rise in urban commandos. However, surprise was caused by the resistance of the Ministry of the Interior. Observers attribute this stiffening to a hope of large-scale Pentagon intervention (only, of course, to protect the lives and goods of US nationals). There has been a reduction in the volume of transactions; the general policy seems to be one of caution. Large investors are still hesitating to commit themselves. . .

Would the Revolution ever figure in a Stock Exchange report? Trapped in this hand-to-mouth existence, a broker of expectations never posted up on any telegraph board, Frank wondered what rate would be quoted for his life in the real world. It is hard to be objective about something you are so close to. 'One would have to be outside the whole thing to see us as we are,' he thought. 'To know how our forces compare with theirs. Whether we're just being caught up in our own myth-making.'

Carlet, whom he rang from a public telephone, needed no urging. They arranged to meet that evening in Simon's Pub, an English-style bar, smart but informal. Chris

Sloane, with his famous jazz piano, would protect them from being overheard. And there was no one who could tell him more about what was going on – including which way the wind was blowing in ‘the highest quarters’. Carlet both was and was not outside the situation. Officially he was a journalist, knowing nothing for sure, but hearing all the rumours that were going. Though he had run the Agence France Presse office for seven years now, he was a self-made man who still had traces of his native Toulouse accent, and the sharp eye of the provincial who has made good. He had two smart silly French daughters looking for husbands, and a magnificent wife with an imposing bosom and real pearls, who gave bridge parties. So banal a family could hardly be genuine. Nor were they. There was a country club of a house with a swimming pool, and butlers, garden parties and candle-lit dinners – hardly the sort of thing an ordinary agency correspondent can afford. More of a ‘special correspondent’ perhaps, as the British call them, except that in this case the messages went to France, courtesy of the Secret Service.

When Frank found out the truth, he had been almost angry. As a poor but honest correspondent himself, and deeply suspicious of wealth, he found such a double game most distasteful. ‘But it’s good strategy,’ said Armando. ‘A press agency must be good for *something*. Two out of every three of the journalists in the AP and the UPI are policemen – only small fry, of course, I don’t suppose they’d rise higher than sergeant on the beat – so why shouldn’t the French do it too?’ Armando was always delighted to see any independent move by France, though Frank found it hard to take them very seriously. Carlet was an inveterate Gaullist: he had been in the Resistance, then an officer in General Leclerc’s army in North Africa. But though a dedicated Free Frenchman, he was too fond of his comfort not to be prepared to make some concessions to almost any regime. Here, he made a great

point of being different from his American colleagues, and preserving a neutral stance. You never know with him, people muttered in well-informed circles. In AP and UPI cables, the comrades figured as 'terrorists' or 'Castroist communist mercenaries'. Thanks to Carlet, the AFP spoke of 'FLN guerrillas', or at worst, 'extremists'. Subtle – but telling – points which symptomized two ultimately incompatible attitudes. As Armando continually reminded him, 'The Empire's cops and Gaullist agents are not birds of a feather by any means.'

Just what did Frank want from Carlet? He wanted to know whether or not outsiders gave them a serious chance of toppling the government and swinging a good part of the armed forces over to their side. Everything else was a question of luck. He was too busy carting round sulphuric acid drops in the boot of his car, and coping with the way Rossi was still messing about despite all his promises, to worry about repercussions on 'the international scene'. He had given up caring about the fate of the world when he was fifteen. The 'universe' was an idea that belonged strictly to the space programme, and these days Frank had his feet firmly on the ground.

That the Movement had made its mark in the world was clear from the fact that planeloads of journalists and top reporters kept arriving – from *Newsweek*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *Paris-Match*, *Die Welt*, *Expresso*. Serious commentators. According to Carlet, all these people 'who can't be brought all this way for nothing' (as though the Front had invited them to come!) were getting rather annoyed. They wanted something spectacular, some blood for their headlines, and 'all you give them is a few unannounced kidnappings, a few quite unimportant people killed (*and* at night, *and* in the most un-get-at-able places), a few frogman operations, and some explosions out in the desert. You don't even let them get Jacques Cousteau in to film your sabotage!' This must have been at their second or

third meeting, and Frank had replied, 'But we don't want them here at all – they can go to hell!'

Being expected to know everything is hard work. But Carlet lived rather well on it. Not only did his guests get 'ultra-confidential' information and addresses, but Vat 69 and smoked salmon too. Whether they were dying for a scoop or a Scotch on the rocks, he could supply it. His mysterious contacts with what *Paris-Match* automatically described as 'Castro-communist subversion' – i.e. with Frank, his most regular 'contact', whom the Front sometimes used as a contact in the other direction – gave him something of the aura of a patron saint permanently enthroned above a throng of worshippers.

But what journalists (and still more, photographers) love is what militants most hate: attitudinizing and showing off. Anxious to have something sensational to take away with them, they start looking for it almost before they touch ground; but when they go, they leave others to pay the bill. And the aftermath of their noisily publicized mistakes can cost a lot. Only a month ago, a man who had a distant cousin of the same name in the guerrillas had, to his amazement, been turned into the *comandante* of a guerrilla front by a reporter famous for personality interviews, and found his face reproduced on 500,000 copies of an international magazine. Glory indeed – for the journalist back home. A couple of weeks of hell for the wretched victim, who had to stay and face the music.

At least with Carlet there was a certain amount of give and take. As president of the foreign correspondents' association, he was someone every newcomer had to meet. Frank too went shortly after arriving to present his credentials, in the form of a sheet of very expensive headed writing-paper identifying him as the representative of *L'Etincelle*, of Lausanne – an avant-garde bi-monthly, with a restricted readership. (It often appeared at rather irregular intervals, he had explained, to be on the safe side.)

But this hadn't stopped them from meeting, with an odd persistence on Carlet's side, and, on Frank's, a pleasure which he disguised by convincing himself that this was a chap he must keep happy, who would be worried if he lost sight of Frank for too long.

'Well, old man, still homeless? Still down and out, no fixed abode?' Carlet looked smarter than ever, with a cigarette holder, a silk handkerchief, a carnation in his buttonhole.

'It's this woman I know – society woman. She's been very kind to me, including giving me hospitality. I really can't say no.'

'Your secret is safe with me.' Carlet's smile made it clear that though he wasn't such a fool as to believe that, he retained his good manners. This kind of conversational duel had become almost a ritual between them. Fiftyish, greying at the temples, smelling of after-shave, his neat moustache well-brushed, in a dark blue suit with a discreet collection of multi-coloured ribbons in the buttonhole, Carlet was almost the personification of the devilish French dandy, the beau with the wicked touch, Charles Boyer in 1950. But the Basque beret was not far off, and one could still detect the farming background beneath the bourgeois surface. He was good company though, despite having to adapt himself to a careful and even cunning role, manipulating the stock-in-trade of third-hand gossip, damp squibs and false rumours he spent his time picking up from embassy drawing-rooms to carry off to his agency office. Whether he was complacent or simply didn't care, he never seemed annoyed if anyone referred to his real job. Indeed he kept it as little secret as possible, not even seeming very concerned to check the truth of the reports he sent back to headquarters (unless perhaps he had a private code for communicating direct with Paris). Clearly, after the knocks the French had taken in Algeria, Syria and Indo-China, he wouldn't mind poaching a bit on American preserves.

'Your discretion is proverbial. I wouldn't be here otherwise.'

'Well, I hope we'll see a bit more of you when you're settled in the presidential palace!'

'But Carlet, palaces are your speciality, not mine. According to the papers, you were in the front row at the last press conference – and I'm told the President's been keeping you behind for tête-à-tête luncheons.'

'Strictly business. The French press is very important to him, you know. It's a symbol. It gives an impression of independence, as far as the Americans are concerned.'

'And is he in good spirits?'

'Well, between ourselves, and please don't repeat this,' said Carlet in a booming voice, 'he's rather worried. All these journalists flying in, you know. Bit of a threat to the national dignity. There's no knowing what they'll see, and no stopping them from writing whatever they like.' Then, lowering his voice, he leant forwards. 'It's likely he'll go before his time is up. The military are pushing pretty hard. They don't want an election – there could easily be a preventive coup.'

'But suppose they know ahead of time that they're going to win? They must be in a good position to be able to know – they transport the ballot boxes, don't they?'

'And the voters. They take them in their trucks and make sure they vote the right way. But that's just the trouble. The election would be won by their party – not by them. With Villagas as President it would be far harder for them to produce a *golpe*.'

'So your view is that it's a race between the army and Acción Popular?'

'And the FLN, remember! Don't forget it's a three-handed game.'

'And who do *you* think's most likely to pick up the winnings?' Frank put the question to Carlet the journalist, not Carlet of the Secret Service. The latter would find it as

hard to see the wood for the trees as he did himself. But the former must still have that sixth sense you find in all real newsmen, that makes it possible for them to comment on a country where they have only been for three days – whereas Frank could no longer say anything about this one because he'd lived here for two years.

(This 'cover' of his has got more to it than he realizes, thought Frank. All that searching through waste-paper baskets, covering tracks, coding messages is just so much time wasted: the key to history is always on the surface. If the entire staff of the Secret Service came to help him, they still wouldn't know as much about what's going on as a bunch of journalists drinking in a bar. The moment he saw the relaxed look on the face of a soldier sunning himself in a Tokyo square with his hands in his pockets, Sorge knew for certain that Japan wasn't going to attack Stalin from the rear. Everything else – all the reports from headquarters, the cross-checking of information, the secrets gleaned by chatting up interpreters – was just so many presumptions, pointers, hints, but nothing solid at all. All the work I've done with microfilms, Hallicrafter transceivers, coding and de-coding reports, has been an utter waste of time. These reporters know far more than I do about what's happening here. . .)

'What winnings, the election or the insurrection?'

Frank came to with a start. Carlet was repeating loudly into his ear for the third time the \$64,000 question of the Revolution.

'Doesn't it come to much the same thing?' he managed to ask, still half sunk in his daydreaming, and needing time to recover his wits.

'Depends who for. For the army it's a real dilemma. According to a colonel friend of mine I saw yesterday, if there's a *golpe* now it'll prove the guerrillas right; it'll mean admitting that the civilian executive is only a puppet, and that representative democracy is the farce the extre-

mists say it is. But if there isn't a *golpe*, it'll mean leaving a lot of incompetents in the government who won't succeed in putting down the rebellion. Being eroded, overwhelmed, destroyed, God knows what.'

'Poor dears. It's tragic. What can we do to make life easier for them?'

'Have a Bloody Mary with me. Keep us from getting too miserable.'

Frank made a face. 'No vodka for me.'

'Waiter! Same again for me, and a Virgin Mary for my friend.'

'Do your army friends really think they're in danger?'

'Well, I don't know that they're in a panic exactly, but you might say they're gritting their teeth. You know as well as I do what the rumours are – fresh consignments of arms coming in for the guerrillas, people parachuting in at night, Cubans landing. . .'

'Paranoia is the only word for that, Carlet. Or propaganda perhaps – a red herring. You've only got to start the ball rolling: these rumours spread themselves.'

'What about your friends? You haven't said anything about them. How happy do they feel about the situation?' He leant across the table with an engaging wink, as much as to say, 'You can talk freely to me; you know where my sympathies lie.'

'They've made themselves rather scarce recently.' (Frank neither lowered his voice nor changed his tone: he wasn't playing ball.) 'Invisible in fact. With all the police searches, and torturing, and people disappearing in prison, and all that, you know. It's only sensible, isn't it?'

Carlet sat back, satisfied; the lie was so patent as to be a veiled admission of success. ('Though if he knew how much truth there is in it he'd find it hard to believe!')

Frank slid the evening paper across to his interlocutor: the day before the body of one of the military secretaries

of the Front, a former deputy, had been washed up by the sea on a lonely beach. The man had died while being tortured in a military camp. They had forgotten to slit his belly, and there were no bullet holes, so in spite of the kilos of scrap metal they had weighted it down with, the corpse had floated. Frank pointed to the picture (it bore no caption) of a decomposing body lying on the sand, with a long iron chain and a mountaineer's axe as an anchor, attached to its neck by a bit of nylon rope.

'Thanks, I've seen it already. It's horrible – but, you know, war isn't a picnic –' and Carlet shrugged his shoulders without finishing the sentence. Then, raising an index finger, he leant closer to Frank's ear, and said, 'Let me tell you something. Between ourselves. Valverde is back. He's hiding out somewhere near by. It should be interesting – he must be cooking up something. It'll be good news for our fraternity; if there's a scoop to be had, I'm counting on you!'

Three days earlier Valverde had been in Zürich, whence he was to go on, via Prague, to Pyongyang, to request help for the Front. He could not possibly have got back; in fact that morning Frank had read a copy of his last radio-message, re-broadcast from Havana. But this laying of false trails was just what made journalists so valuable. If myths of this kind were still being bandied round, things couldn't be going too badly. As long as a revolution gives rise to its own legends, it is still alive and kicking.

'Congratulations! You seem to know everything! We get it from different sources, of course, but I *had* heard that he was back – from people who know.'

('Which of us is the bigger liar?' Frank wondered. 'But at least Carlet has some excuse for bluffing me; after all, that's his job. The press and Intelligence run on false rumours as a car runs on petrol. But as for me – wouldn't it be better to let the Revolution die a natural death?' Wasn't it a bit like putting it on a heart-lung machine to

keep on fuelling it like this? To judge from the stories about it now going the rounds, the Movement was still quite healthy. But unfortunately there comes a time when stories lose momentum and have to be given an extra push, and that was happening a bit too often for Frank's liking. Valverde was not really the Raffles of the urban guerrilla war, but thanks to the mass media, what began as a joke had almost become a reality. He was the heart-throb of every schoolgirl in the country, with his dark good looks, and those dashing successful bank raids in which no one was ever killed. Chivalrous, too: one day, as usual, he asked the staff of the First National Bank to strip down to their underwear before locking them in the toilets (ladies in the Ladies, men in the Gents) and the manager's secretary had no bra on. The manager leered – and Valverde hit him with the butt of his gun. But perhaps the amount of lying that goes into the making of a myth is a bit like dirt in a restaurant-kitchen; as long as the customers keep coming and don't see behind the scenes, that's all that matters. 'Come off it, Carlet. Let's stop playing. I'm not being looked after by any rich woman who showers me with kindness. On the contrary, I am looking after a girl who is extremely hard up and anything but kind. And as for getting rich in the war, the Movement barely scrapes together enough to feed the families of the men in gaol, pay its full-time members and get its literature printed. The Revolution is a bottomless pit, swallowing up millions of dollars every year. Arms deliveries? Sure, we're expecting them; but we're in the process of being fleeced on a huge scale by an extremely competent Italian crook. The election? There will be one, alas, for even if the arms get there in time and are distributed in time, with enough ammunition, *and* to comrades who know how to use them, I doubt whether the people really want us to embark on any mass slaughter on their behalf. Valverde has not slipped back into the country: it isn't easy to organize a

passport for someone the police want quite so badly, and the frontiers are far too well guarded. . .')

Frank longed to say all this aloud. To tear down the façade. To be himself for once. To feel the ground solid beneath his feet. Liars always come to a bad end.

Why to Carlet specially? Just because he was there. It was terribly tantalizing – if only to see the look on his face. He'd be like a burst balloon, wrinkled and pathetic. To face him with reality in all its foolish mediocrity: not the history of the old lithographs, nor yet the stories of the sensational newspapers, in which people cross frontiers without a hitch, with impeccable passports, in which revolvers never jam and cars never break down, in which you shoot your man dead from fifty yards away as they do in the cinema. To face him with it and then go. To jump into a taxi and leave Carlet alone on the stage in the empty theatre.

But something held him back: not prudence, and certainly not any sense of responsibility. Not a sense of the ridiculous, either. More the force of inertia and weariness, almost of resignation. It was too late. He was too deeply enmeshed in pretence and secrecy, in everlastingly putting on the play of the underground, that seedy and exhausting provincial touring theatre that is the best a second rate actor can hope for.

A beaming Carlet, with knowing smiles to right and left, paid the bill ceremoniously.

'Good luck, Carlet. You're a credit to your profession. And you always give my ego a boost. What more could anyone ask?'

Carlet looked round and chuckled, then raised his eyes to heaven, as though calling on the pianist for support. 'Now, young man, don't make fun of your elders!' And wagging a finger under Frank's nose, he spoke in a loud and prophetic tone: 'You'll be just the same one day; old journalists are always cynics who believe nothing.' Then,

lowering his voice to a whisper, 'All the best to your lady friend.'

Off he went, waving a hand in farewell, like a will-o'-the-wisp into the surrounding darkness. At the end of the road he turned, with a final good-bye to Frank, who glimpsed his cheerful face for the last time in the glare of a passing headlamp, as white as a rabbit's tail in a country lane.

★★★★★

Your aloofness had become permanent. Hitherto you had sometimes come down from your fortress at night, barefoot to make no noise, and met me briefly on the sand below; I could still believe that it was you whom I took in my arms. But now, even when we were making love, you were never anything but rock – fortified, impregnable. However close our bodies were, there still remained a distance. You had your own special way of withdrawing even while you were present: you made yourself compact and dense as though pulling back to concentrate all your forces inside, behind your moat and your loop-holes. For a long siege, or for the winter. Some women, when they no longer love, disappear by expansion, entering a kind of gaseous state. Others proceed more cunningly by a tactic of evacuation, leaving the enemy a lifeless body from which all the soul and feeling have been systematically cleared: the lover finds himself making love to a doll. Your way was to disappear into yourself by contraction, digging yourself into your centre of gravity, and becoming extraordinarily heavy, like an atom bomb. Though you actually became thinner (from worry or overwork, I don't know which) your mass increased. A wide-open diamond eye was always on guard. Gone were the unselfconscious gestures of the past – the way you used suddenly to shake down your hair by swinging your head back, for instance, the way you spread yourself by waving your arms or

swishing your skirt, the freedom of your gaze. Before, whether at home with me or in your own outdoors, you always left a little of your soul behind, and it hovered like a faint perfume between the sheets, lingering between one room and another, even from street to street. Something of yourself was being lost perhaps. Now you became more miserly. Any gesture that strayed, any thoughtless word, the faintest gleam in your eye, would all be brought back under strict escort. Since you were about to abandon me, I suppose you could no longer abandon yourself. And suddenly I found myself drawing back too. There were no more concessions on either side. One might just give, but never receive, and thanks were out of the question. Between us each must always remain a separate self. And when there had to be some exchange, we would pretend; our passion for sincerity forced us to pretend; our determination to be honest made us hypocrites. We would make love, and since you no longer loved me, you must somehow let me know. Not by theatrical impassivity, certainly. God, those slow-motion whirlpools into which our bodies were reluctantly sucked down, as they sought to achieve the ultimate closeness while yet remaining separate, to penetrate without being captured! Those cautious swirlings, those distant interlockings, those ritual gyrations like a ballet of two gladiators sizing one another up and circling round before they fight, like an interminable flourish of swords before a fencing match. Those final encounters of ours were frigid duels, the winner being the one who struck last. Round and round we went in those contests of perverted love. Pleasure makes one shut one's eyes – that is the literal truth. Though you never said it in so many words, never even by implication, you managed to enforce the rule of deceit between us: we had to take our pleasure without flinching or blinking, looking the enemy steadily in the eye. We had to conceal our orgasms, for as long as we could, behind a polite

smile. I could never hope to compete with you in that game. You hid your pleasure so well that it was impossible to find it – it wasn't in your eyes, or in your breathing; it was hardly even in your belly which you permitted only purely muscular contractions. In your heart? Best pass over that. And I found you just as distant and stiff afterwards. There was no going back, as I came painfully to realize. Instead of love we now had only selfishness, and our love-making had become an obscenity, a physical function to be got through as fast and as quietly as possible, in which only our organs were involved and not ourselves.

Oh, Celia, do you remember that last month? From start to finish, everything was in code, and I had no key to decipher the messages you were giving me in your dark eyes, your calm nurse's gestures, your careful hands. Yet the meaning was clear enough, God knows: time after time we would sell one another short, blunting what should have been keenest, reducing excitement to apathy. Nothing makes one more agonizingly thirsty than drinking just a little: our thirst was unsatisfied and absolutely overwhelming. My desire punished and killed yours, and yours mine. You had your revenge on me by thinking about someone else – when I had so long had mine on you by thinking only about you.

One more sham window between us. But had there ever been a time when we were really in contact?

★★★★★

Six p.m. at the *bodega*, at the end of Calle Delfin: the most secluded spot in town, at the bottom of a little cul-de-sac. It was a great meeting-place for the conspirators and outlaws of the Spanish colony. Manuel was a regular there. It was in this same cool, dark bar, many years earlier, that exiles used to meet after the Civil War to

talk wryly of their hopes and plans for the future People's Republic of Spain. Frank had rung Manuel earlier that day at Guttentach's, the printer's where he was to do the work after hours. Manuel had sounded uncomfortable, as though someone could overhear; he said there was something suspicious in the place, and that one couldn't always be as private as one wished, even on Christmas Eve. 'But you'll get your Christmas present all the same,' he had said, finally. 'The place we first met.'

For all the sweltering heat, it was Christmas Eve. The Yule logs were already melting and going rancid in the cake-shop windows; flakes of cotton-wool were raining down on all the most up-to-date Japanese electrical goods; juvenile black Santas were auctioning corn cakes stuffed with almonds and raisins wrapped in banana leaves. The spurious holiday jollity made the atmosphere as electric as if there'd been several bombings. Frank found it slightly intoxicating. Yet he had only drunk a few glasses of papaya on the way, as he performed the usual zigzags and about-turns to shake off anyone who might be following. It was just six-thirty as he reached the corner opposite Calle Delfin.

Everything seemed normal, and he started to cross the road, dodging among the cars. Suddenly four men appeared from the bottom of the cul-de-sac – one in plain clothes in front, and two cops behind, frogmarching Manuel between them. Another man followed, with a gun on his hip, carrying in his left hand a parcel wrapped in gift paper, with little gold bells on it and a huge pink bow. Frank was in the middle of the street; he could neither go back nor shout. He walked faster. Manuel had seen him: their eyes met. Passers-by moved aside and stood watching, more afraid than curious. Frank still kept coming towards them, unable to take his eyes from Manuel. He had his gun in his belt, his Spanish Star, with just the one magazine – and five seconds to make up his mind

in. The DIFA car (no official markings) was parked perhaps fifty yards away, and there seemed to be another at the corner. So, in the immediate vicinity, he had four of them in point-blank range, only one of whom was prepared to shoot quickly. He could certainly knock out one or two – but then what? He might easily hit Manuel as well in the confusion. 'If I let him go I'm a shit. But if I use my gun I'm a fool: neither of us can possibly get away.' He was now level with the group, but going the opposite way. Manuel seemed to look at him without seeing him, not apparently noticing him at all, but as they drew level, he began to smile, and walked a little slower, so that they had to push him. A weary, resigned smile, and a rapid blink, as much as to say, 'It doesn't matter'; or perhaps, 'I know it'd be no use.' And adding, 'See you! All the best to our friends!' It was all there in that one rather wry smile, fatalistic but without irony and not a hint of reproach. The cop behind him dug the barrel of his sub-machine-gun into his ribs, and they dragged him along, a dead weight, to their car. A driver was waiting at the wheel; they all got in and it zoomed away. Manuel just had time to turn his head, and say good-bye through the rear window – not mouthing the words, just using his eyes and that same sad smile.

The crowd in the street, who had been silenced for a time, now started to move again, and there was a brief hum of frightened comment. Frank stood where he was, petrified, unable to move, as the people on the pavement at first side-stepped him, and then began jostling. He came to, and slowly walked on towards the *bodega*, to carry on with the original plan as though nothing had happened, perhaps to convince himself that nothing *had* happened, and that life could go on as before. But when he reached the entrance, something stopped him. Through the glass he recognized several friends of Manuel's, sitting silent and still with their mugs of beer in front of them,

round the tables with the red and white mats. Through his jacket, he gripped the handle of his revolver. For the first time in his life he wanted to kill someone. Anyone. Himself, if no one else.

★★★★★

‘The place we first met.’ The wheel had come full circle. Do you remember, Celia? That was the bar you used to take me to before dinner in the evenings, in the days when we were still free to come and go: the beer came from a barrel, and they served it cold in a stone mug, with little dishes full of *tapitas*: salami, anchovies, clams, olives. And one evening, Manuel happened to be there and you introduced us. It was the merest chance, but what a lucky one: that unplanned introduction, unrelated to your work as liaison agent, in fact established a most successful liaison. Manuel was a friend rather than a comrade. Indeed he seemed to be the only man for whom you had a real, disinterested affection, without thought of sexual or political gain. He treated you like his daughter, though he had no children, but all you could give in return was the love of a younger sister; as an orphan, I suppose, you can never let yourself have a father. You certainly respected him, but not overmuch; enough to give him a measure of influence over you. The two of you were very much on a par when it came to disrespect. What you had in common, you, the disciplined communist, and he, the impenitent anarchist, was that neither of you ever left things to other people. Apart perhaps from Joaquim (of whom of course you seldom spoke), the leaders of your Party wielded no magic as far as you were concerned. Manuel never thought of anyone as superior to him, either, but that was because he himself was quite incapable of treating anyone as a subordinate. You obeyed Party directives with a docility that was purely administrative. So you found yourselves

in the same camp, though for different reasons: pride on your part, modesty on his. It seems to be a law of nature in all Latin countries that all creatures are in one of two categories, superior or inferior: leader or militant, husband or wife, boss or employee, priest or parishioner. So the mere fact of resisting the idea of hierarchy is enough to create a bond between any two people.

Anyway, that evening Manuel and I really talked – it was not just another ‘contact’. With apparent nonchalance, but considerable skill, he set me a little entrance exam, two or three questions about history, which I passed. He was emotionally a Latin American, but not intellectually, and thought of Europe as the natural cradle of his Movement. My Swiss origins in particular interested him. There is a kind of instinctive complicity among irregulars like Manuel, the world over, people who are a law unto themselves. They need no passports or rubber stamps to make common cause against the respectable majority whose papers are in order. From their long experience scavenging among the dustbins of history they can recognize one another at a glance.

Did you feel excluded, for once, from our burgeoning friendship? Did you feel jealous, and somehow short-circuited, you who were always so careful to keep your friends in separate compartments? Anyway, it was there, in that bar, after Manuel had left, that you were deliberately nasty to me for the first time, taunting me with the disgrace of being Swiss.

‘Well, it seems that your Helvetic Confederation takes you everywhere,’ you burst out, tight-lipped. ‘You can play the scholar above my head, with my friend Manuel. You can get in touch with arms dealers in Geneva. You can get money shifted from one bank to another for the Front. And you can still masquerade as a dumb journalist when you see Carlet’. In short, my all-purpose neutrality seemed to you like one almighty swindle. ‘You can

get in well with absolutely everyone. You admit it yourself.'

'Well, it suits you pretty well, doesn't it?'

'Oh yes, it's always useful to have someone around who can fix anything. By the way, maybe you could get us some chocolate cheap? I'm told that sweetshops everywhere give Swiss citizens a twenty per cent discount; all you have to do is show your passport.' You were certainly determined to humiliate me. There was no stopping you now you'd got under way: 'Why don't you work for the Red Cross? You'd have such a clear conscience, bandaging up both sides – cops and comrades, Nigerians and Biafrans, Americans and Vietnamese. You need never worry again. You really would feel comfortable then!' It was grotesque in the extreme, but you were thoroughly enjoying yourself. 'After all, what can ever happen to a Swiss? Just imagine – a Swiss prisoner of war! It'd be a riot! They'd have to apply the Geneva Conventions then, wouldn't they?'

As usual you were right, you witch. Try as I may, nothing ever does happen to me. Luck is always on my side. Yet I feel as though, somewhere inside me, I have made a kind of profound pact with imprisonment, physical pain and exile; it's just that my life never gets to the appointed spot or time, so it has remained a dead letter. On Christmas Eve, if I'd arrived at the *bodega* five minutes earlier, your state police would have done what they could to satisfy at last my hankering for solitude. To say nothing of my taste for violent death. But misfortune is something one is born into – one can't have it just for the asking. Manuel was born into it; he can trace his pedigree back for three or four generations. I don't know whether I could be naturalized.

But it was me they should have arrested, not Manuel, and it is me they should be torturing now. Oh, Celia, I swear to you, I'll make them pay for their mistake!

★★★★★

This morning, on my way past the Hilton, I saw some journalists boarding the airport bus, homeward bound. There must have been at least fifty of them, all with their cameras, and their suitcases, and their shoulder-bags.

Clearly we are no longer front-page news. There has been a coup in Laos, and the President of the Philippines has just been deposed. In a few years' time we shall have ceased to exist. So we're on our own again – no longer worthy of the notice of the world's press. Country cousins, second-class militants, narrow partisans, moles blinded by our petty sectarian passions who will go on quietly digging our passages underground. They were beginning to get bored here, and are glad to go. They'll never know that it is they, the flying moles, who are the blind ones. And that what they call 'news' is one of history's cleverest devices for eluding observation. The news of the journalists is a kind of poor man's eternity: so many things happen that nothing at all seems to be happening. The multi-coloured disc spins so fast that it appears motionless and colourless, every day the same as every other. Professional newsmen must, in the nature of the case, by-pass the essential, for the essence of all events lies in their origins, and origins are always concealed and inaudible. They will go to Vientiane or Manila for three days to report on a change of government, but what will they learn of the human moles, the Huk or the Pathet Lao, labouring and suffering under the surface?

There is only one thing wrong with international observers, but it makes everything they do valueless: they observe. They observe calmly and coolly, keeping their distance. They keep their noses out of things, unsullied by the blood and the shit: consequently, they *see* nothing. Nothing but what is, like themselves, superficial and

inessential; nothing but anecdotes and local colour. From their latter-day Olympian heights, journalists look down 'with interest' on the ants rushing about below. Like prostitutes, they offer their curiosity for sale – here one day, there another – without ever getting caught up in a compelling passion. They have never read our well-thumbed Bible, so they don't know what the great Hegel said: 'Nothing great in the world has been accomplished without passion.' It may be paranoia, megalomania or resentment; it may be rebellion, or hope, or that fierce flame of love that is often taken for hatred. But without wild passions, instinctive fancies, without a stirring of the blood, the world will not go round. Oh yes, of course there is some political science expert somewhere, tucked away in his office, charting the consequences of all these little localized movements. But that has nothing at all to do with understanding history. Anyone can understand the mechanism by which the mincing-machine of history works; but it cannot start working unless it is powered by an intuitive certainty. It is we, ourselves, who switch on the monster machine that crushes, and in crushing, shapes us; and we can only do it by hurling ourselves into it whole, with our anxieties, and our childish bruises and our phobias. No one need tell us that what comes out the other end is an unrecognizable pulp in which the things for which we felt such passion have vanished. We know that it is a mistake to dream, and dream of finding our dreams again in the final mincemeat (or pulp). We know that history is not made in the image of man. But let cynics remember that if some men in their folly had not gone on pursuing particular obsessions till they died, the human race would have no history.

The fact of the matter is that in our day history has become too serious a matter to be left to the historians. To people who can do no more than weigh the pros and cons. All you impartial journalists and distinguished

leader-writers, all you experts and liberals – you don't love enough or hate enough to understand *anything* about this overwhelming machine, and what makes its great toothed wheels bite and grind. You rush from country to country, from one circus to another, blasé, impatient, self-important, in pursuit of colour and noise. But it was down below, in the whirling dust of the arena, amid the slow and confused to-ing and fro-ing of the fighting, treading down the same blood-stained sand over ages of agony, that a handful of fanatics – those lunatics who called themselves Christians – invented Western Europe. Far from any cameras; never in the headlines. You fools, who were once my brothers, just hurry up and distribute your good and bad marks to us who are about to die, and then, for God's sake, get the hell out of here. Leave us alone. One day, when we have stormed our Babylon, and the guerrillas come down from the *sierra* in the daylight; one day – in three years' time, or thirty – the Revolution will offer you a free invitation. But not before. We know how busy you are, what with cocktail parties and dinners, autographing parties, private views, and ministerial crises; we realize that you simply haven't the time to attend to all the mutterings that can be heard from the swarming darkness, from those whom their hope for the future constrains to spend the present crawling in the mud. When we are well and truly dirty, you will come to the celebration, and you will say some splendid things about the Revolution – as long as the honeymoon lasts; before disillusionment sets in. And the Revolution too will lose its illusions, and learn to survive its merciless enemies unmercifully. One day. In thirty years' time perhaps. But for the moment, just get the hell out, will you? Your time has not yet come.

And one word more: when it does come, it will soon be over. You will be disappointed. You'll be quick to take up your distance again. I can already hear your Appeal to the

International Conscience against our excesses and our intolerance.

Another word: this really is the last, but honesty demands it. We shall be disappointed too.

★★★★★

They arranged to pick Frank up at the Lord Jim – a late-night music spot near the middle of town – to take him to see Joaquim. It was still early evening, and the bar was empty. The ancient, shaky Dodge, probably recovered from some scrap-heap, set off along the motorway to the east. After ten minutes or so, his guide said, 'You know the drill? It's the same for everyone.'

'Oh yes. Eyes shut and lie head down on the back seat.'

After thirty seconds' hesitation, the man next to the driver, sounding somewhat put out, replied, '*Sí, compañero*. With a scarf over your eyes. That's the rule.'

Frank took the blindfold being prepared for him, and tied it round his own head. As he lay down, he said, 'Why not a spot of chloroform too, while you're at it?'

They made no answer. He was being ridiculous: it might be reasonable for a neophyte to take offence, but not for him. The rule applied to everyone, even members of the secretariat. In Uruguay, after all, when more than three Tupamaros met together, they wore hoods. Indeed Frank had surprised even himself by his petty bourgeois touchiness. Perhaps it was just that he was in a bad mood.

He was aware when they came off the motorway: the car turned, slowed down, then speeded up again. Between the smoothness of the driving and the fact that whenever they stopped at traffic lights or crossroads it was quiet enough for him to hear leaves rustling, he judged that they were in a residential area, with jasmine hedges and trees stirred by the breeze. A hint of something cushioned, a fragrance, a feeling of seclusion, conveyed to his sixth

sense that they must be somewhere like the country club. A gate creaked, they went over a hump, and there was the sound of a lock turning as the gate shut.

'We're there. You're okay now, comrade.'

Frank took off his blindfold. They were in a large and dimly lit garage, presumably underground. Three brand-new American cars were parked there, and there was still plenty of room. He went up a little spiral staircase, the two men keeping close on either side; at the top they paused for a moment, and one of them knocked three times, then twice, on the metal door. A comrade he didn't know, wearing a machine pistol in a bandolier, opened the door, and let them through into a hallway with black and white tiles on the floor. Magnificent black-speckled mirrors hung above antique tables with curved legs. Round the walls there were Mayan masks with eyes of volcanic glass, illuminated from inside. What multi-millionaire collector was prepared to risk harbouring Joaquim beneath this rich turquoise ceiling? He felt as though they were burglars at large in a castle from which the lord was unaccountably absent. The three men stayed talking in the entrance, and left him to advance into this grand opera decor by himself.

A door opened at the far end, from the garden side, and, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, Celia came in and welcomed him with a smile. Her hair hung loose, and she was wearing the same navy blue suit he had seen her hang up so recently at home. Or rather, in the old place. Her *home* was here. She was quite clearly the mistress of the house, and she was receiving him here, without ceremony, with the easy and efficient simplicity – natural because completely mechanical – of an air hostess or a receptionist, or a supremely superior saleswoman.

'You haven't changed since I saw you last. No need to be shy. Make yourself at home.'

How much of her easy manner was the anonymous

friendliness of comrades, how much the complicity of old friends who haven't really lost touch, even though it is a while since they met?

'Well, I'd find it hard to change much in three weeks. Unlike some people.'

'Goodness! Is it really so long?'

'It really is! Happy New Year, if it's not too late to wish you one.'

'Perhaps I should have sent you a card?'

Frank joined in the game without a quiver, and hardly even any sense of surprise. It was as though, without knowing it, he had been preparing to play it from the very first. Almost as though he were quite relieved to find her here at last. He smiled too (the guest who has been before, and knows the house) and came forward into the drawing-room, where two shaded lamps on low tables cast a pleasant European-winter-evening glow. It was cosy, *gemütlich*, *sympa*, the effect could hardly have been unintentional. But Frank made no comment, and still smiling sank into a leather armchair to await the great man himself. The floor was littered with heaps of the last few days' papers, their huge black headlines announcing what looked like national mourning: Escape Sensation; 10,000 Troops in Badilla Search; Badilla's Plane in Cuba; Mystery Submarine in Contact with Escaped Leftist Boss: Congress Seeks Full Investigation of Gaol Staff. There were some Impressionist paintings on the wall, which might or might not have been reproductions; there were heavy, potbellied, pre-Columbian ceramics which were obviously original; and, on a little lacquered table beside him, lay the latest numbers of *Time*, *Newsweek* and a number of other foreign magazines. Whoever lived here certainly kept up to date with the news.

'Well, I see things are all right with you.'

'Yes, indeed. Would you like something to drink?'

'No thanks, not at the moment.'

'You got in all right? No one stopped you to check you, or search you, or anything?' (said in the tone of one who asks whether the traffic was heavy, and whether the route was easy to find).

'You'd better ask your bodyguards. I was brought here with full security.'

'You look a bit drawn – are you working too hard?'

'Well, you're looking great, Celia. Success suits you.'

'But it's a success for us all, Frank. We all needed something big like this to happen; everyone's morale was slipping.'

'Well, yes, but I think your morale has been particularly helped by it. One has only to look at you!'

'Well, it did take us four months' planning and hard work – you can't improvise a thing like that, you know.'

'By "us" you mean him and you?'

'There were other people too – there were several of us. You saw those comrades I was with.'

'You know Manuel was caught with the leaflets – you still remember Manuel, I suppose?'

'Don't be so horrible. Of course I know about Manuel.'

'What about *him*? Has he had time to think about Manuel – or has he got more important things on his mind?'

'He has things to say to you, I know, though I don't think they're anything to do with Manuel.'

'That's a pity, because I don't think I've got much to do with anything else now, myself.'

'I hope you haven't left anything in the apartment – you've cleared out all your stuff, haven't you?'

'No. Why?'

'Don't be stupid. Manuel used to come there. He had the address. Are you trying to commit suicide or something?'

'But look, it's a month now since they took him, and here I am still, okay.'

'But Frank, you fool, this is terrible! You're a real danger to the organization! Don't you realize, Manuel can't possibly - Look, Frank, I love Manuel like a brother, but you can't imagine what things they're doing to him. You're a foreigner. You don't know what the people in the DIFA are like: they're sick; they're psychopaths; and now they've been having courses with the Yankees at Fort Bragg and in the Canal Zone. Charquero's the man in charge of the torturings, with a doctor. He's got to be got rid of, Charquero. He's already killed twenty of our people under torture, and if they don't die, they're castrated. And then two-thirds of those commit suicide afterwards.'

'When's the bastard going to be killed, then?'

'It's not as easy as that. He's better guarded than the President. One has to consider whether it's worth risking the lives of a whole group of us just to get one of them. And then, you know, there are some new political problems coming up. It all needs a lot of thought.'

'You're afraid of reprisals.'

'"You"? Aren't you one of us any more?'

'I'm asking if you are afraid of reprisals, because any reprisals there are at this point will be against Manuel. They're really wild about Joaquim escaping.'

'Well you know, the Party are studying the new situation, and things are moving pretty quickly. There are important discussions going on inside the bureau, especially now Joaquim is here. Anyway, he'll explain it all to you. But tell me, why do you talk about "you" now, and not "us"? Won't you really have something to drink?'

Frank stopped answering. Pax! Let's stop the game for a minute! The voice of Joan Baez floated up from the shadows, her guitar gravely picking out the melody. He looked at Celia sitting opposite him a few yards away on the leather sofa; the sofa matched his chair, and she went with it perfectly, shoes off, legs tucked under her. He looked at her, for the first time since he had entered this ghost

palace, and he simply didn't recognize her any more. Where the hell were they? An elegant drawing-room, surrounded by bowls of flowers and works of art, time for after-dinner brandy: here they sat, two trendy young leftists ready for a discussion of the cinema, the elections, interior decorating, workers' self-management, holidays in Greece, or any other fashionable topic. But what the hell were they playing at? All this social chit-chat, this assumed easiness, this detached way of talking about Manuel, about comrades whose testicles were being crushed, about the war they were losing and the life they had already lost, as though it were the latest film. Could he be dreaming? The whole thing must be a play someone was putting on. Either someone was putting it on, or they were being pushed into it by something like fear – fear of seeing their real selves, of discovering that they had become lost to one another's sight, and that from now on a film of convention and acquired shame would mask everything they did, would mask even their faces, whenever they were alone together.

We've gone through the quicklime of oblivion, and here we are miming ourselves, in a ghostly harlequinade, moving our lips without saying real words. We are the sleep-walking versions of our own lives; our places have been taken by ham actors who happen to be our doubles. Where are you, Celia? Who has taken you away? Who is it who is playing this part in your body? My love in your stage make-up, my far-off hieroglyph, my love, my love – I can see no trace in you any more of all that I once thought was there. . .

'Are you quite sure you won't have a drink in this heat?'

'I said "you"?' Frank suddenly stood up, and turning off the record-player swung round to face her. He burst into a torrent of speech: 'Well, that's because when I used to say "we" all I ever meant was us – the two of us. My Liberation Front was you, if you want to know the truth.

But I don't think we really form a front any more, you and I. Correct me if I'm wrong. That's reason number one. Then, reason number two: Armando. I presume he's seeing things more and more clearly the bigger his doses of morphine get, and he hasn't been in touch with me at all for three weeks. I don't even know where he is. When a man's dying I daresay he prefers to stick with the people who really belong. Reason number three -'

Amid this wild, breathless harangue, Frank felt Celia's eyes leave his and fasten on something or someone behind him.

'Am I interrupting something?'

He had arrived. Massive and powerful-looking; the silent type. Checked shirt, beige trousers, moccasins: everything about him was quite ordinary, except his head. It was not handsome, but had a finely sculptured look, features standing out strong and forceful against the light. To Frank he came as a surprise, after the photos that had been splashed all over the newspapers for the past few days: he looked tougher, more a man of the people. The wide jaw, the thick neck, the fleshy lips, and the famous spot on his right eye that made him always wear dark glasses in public. So here he was, the virtuoso of the nylon rope, the trapeze and the knife, as large as life. Frank was always curious as to what made such stars tick, and the rubberneck in him was easily fascinated; his reaction was to be impressed rather than aggressive.

'Could you make us some coffee, Celia?' It wasn't a question; and it was more like an order to a servant than the directive of a leader. 'It's going to be a long night,' he added, turning to Frank.

Celia quickly put her shoes on, and rose without a word, avoiding Frank's eye as she went out; torn between amusement and annoyance, he thought to himself that *machismo* was quite a paying proposition. After all, Celia was a woman, and in Latin countries the women make the

coffee while the men talk. If only he'd remembered that sooner!

The two men were left alone. There was a comic incongruity between Joaquim, the escaped convict, and these cushy surroundings, the home of some politician or oil-man. He wandered about silently for a minute among the Aztec potteries and lacquered tables, a large man though not fat, treading firmly on the furry white carpet, looking at the pictures with a quizzical smile; finally he sat down. The Revolution has its VIPs too, who must be kept hidden. What hiding-place could be better than this, the lion's mouth? Clearly the Party had friends in high places – high from one point of view, at least.

'There are some changes, Frank. Celia's going to be working with me from now on. Armando doesn't need her any more.' At last here was someone talking straight.

'I suppose he's told you how things stand?'

'Well yes, indirectly. Not very fully. I think it was about time someone else took over. Not his fault, of course, poor devil –'

'Why "poor"?''

'Armando's finished; he's no use any more. You know that as well as I do. All we can do for him is get him out of the country. Present him with a complete set of Bolívar's works, and let him rant away somewhere quiet. But of course he can't be made to go.'

'No, he certainly can't.'

'I wanted to see you because I've heard such a lot about you. And because I'll be covering Armando's sector, at least for a while.'

'I'm not much use any more either – I'm a bit like Armando.'

'The Party are very grateful for all you've done. We know what a lot it's been. But now, in the new phase we're entering, things are going to be a bit different.'

'Oh, yes, I quite understand that,' said Frank, trying to

help him out. In fact, he didn't understand at all, nor did he really want to understand. He had an instinctive dislike of new phases.

'The situation in the country has changed – so naturally things will be different in the Party too.'

'Of course.' The words came out quite easily, though Frank knew very well that once people start talking about things being natural, or sensible, it always means that they are cooking up something that is far from being either.

'We've got to deal with the immediate danger; we must save the Party. It's clear that the unity of the Party is in very real danger, and that's what we have to work to preserve. The fractionalists and left-wing opportunists are doing their best to break up the Party. But I can promise you we shan't let them.'

'I'm sure you won't.'

'Now, if we carry on as we have been, with the same methods of struggle and the same people in charge of the military front, we shall only be precipitating the destruction of the Party.'

'Absolutely.'

'And I'll tell you something else: there are people in the government who want to make contact with us, people who want to see the country change course. And they aren't necessarily opposed to the idea of a democratic peace, with neither side winning or losing.'

'Sounds good,' agreed Frank. He doubted whether Joaquim would be telling him so much if the contacts hadn't already been made and the negotiations almost completed. It would certainly give us a breathing space, he thought to himself; we'd gain time, and perhaps we could then make a split in the enemy camp.

'There may even be a truce between the Front and the government quite soon –'

'In other words, the Party's abandoning the armed

struggle? Is that what you're saying? Thanks for letting me know.'

'The Party'll do what it thinks best. It's for us to decide.'

'Don't the militants in the Front get any say? All your allies, the people who've followed you, the men who've gone off to the *sierra*, all the hundreds of people in the underground who've given up everything they had in the city because the Communist Party told them that the armed road was the only road, and that we'd all follow it together to the end, to death or victory. Surely they add up to quite a lot of people?'

Frank would really have preferred to go on saying, 'Yes, of course, absolutely,' nodding his head like a well-trained pupil. But he thought of Armando, and Lucas, and Manuel, and the children whose bodies were left lying in the road, in puddles of oil and blood, crushed under the punctured tyres of lorry-wheels. He remembered that little old man lurching about Lidice in the dark, and those women in black keeping vigil, mothers and sisters waiting with anxious eyes behind their wooden shutters, night after night, year after year. He remembered the grenade he had thrown at those adolescents in uniform who were not really his enemies at all. And the people who blew themselves up at home by the kitchen sink because the Party had told them that, come what may, they must produce six incendiary bombs before dark. They were all so many presences out there in the shadows, beyond the walls of this lordly hiding-place. It was hardly for him, a gate-crasher, to take it upon himself to speak for them; yet he felt and saw and heard them all around him, and it was more than he could bear. No. Definitely. He could not go on being the good scout who only has to be given directions.

'It's not a question of *abandoning* the armed struggle,' Joaquim went on deliberately. 'Just of acquiring the means to carry it on. We've got to shift our main stress. We have

to multiply our forms of struggle, and re-vitalize the mass movement, and activate the trade unions –'

'What about the guerrilla groups? And the urban action groups? Are they supposed to change tack completely – start marching with banners, and demand handouts and subsidies from the town council?'

'The Party will give all militants the order to withdraw when the time comes. It'll mean an order to disband for some of the guerrilla groups – the ones under our direct command. The others will do what they think best – that's not our affair.'

'And where does Andrés fit into all this?'

'He's trying to manoeuvre a split. As usual. He's using the guerrilla war to divide the Party, and try and get control of it. He's got to be expelled from the political bureau – there's no alternative.'

'And what about you personally, Joaquim? Do you go along with that?'

Andrés and Joaquim were Castor and Pollux, Tweedledum and Tweedledee. They were two young rebels who had set themselves up together against the Party's old guard, and their friendship had become something of a legend. Together they had fought their first campaign in the Party's early shock groups; they had joined the bureau at the same time, and had been the first to leave, also together, to go off and establish the Front in the west, three years ago. The guerrilla force was their joint creation.

But personal equations have no place in political algebra: a leader has to think in terms of class bases and alliances and the balance of forces. This man had seen the conclusion to which the facts led. His change of direction was relentless and honest: no subterfuge, no aces up his sleeve. He was totally practical. And Frank, who had always thought of himself as a political animal, realized, as he heard Joaquim talk, what a long way he still had to go. He was completely outclassed. Joaquim had involved Frank in his

game simply for the purpose of getting in contact with Rossi's arms network. Yet, when it came down to it, was he being more cynical than Frank himself had been in the way he had used Manuel, and Lucas, and so many others? And after all, some day it might be Joaquim who found himself being used.

By the time his host had finished his account of all the ins and outs of the new line (which was to penetrate 'down to the grass roots' during the next few months, and reach the national press in a year's time) Frank knew that he had made a decision almost without realizing it: he was not going to follow the Party down the dirty back-streets of these tactics. Not because it was that most un-royal of roads, the road to power, signposted 'Sensitive Noses Keep Out': he wasn't afraid of nasty smells and didn't give a damn for aesthetics. No, it wasn't that. It was because he was on his own in a foreign country, and it is impossible to be a realist away from home. You have to have your feet on the ground, your own home ground. To be informed without being responsible is a heavy responsibility. He had been led to this country by a vision, a polar star; and it was that that gave him the courage to carry on when the exile became unbearable. Were he to betray that vision, he would still be no nearer to discovering the reality of America – that *terra ignota* for which he felt so profound an antipathy – and he would lose all sense of direction. Of course there are no more straight lines in nature than in the landscapes of the professional politicians. He could only determine his own straight line and stick to it, without a sideways glance. Even though some learned Mephistopheles might tempt him with the assurance that history always moves sideways.

So, they had come to a parting of the ways. He would follow his straight line (towards Andrés) even though it should prove to lead nowhere. With this difference: he would share neither the illusions of the guerrillas (power

out of the barrel of a gun, and in five years' time we'll be wiping our boots on the velvet curtains of the presidential palace) nor their hatred for the renegades and social traitors of the Party. It is hard to get very far without some impetus, either of hatred or of plausible illusion: you can only face death with equanimity if there is something to blur your view. All he could hope to do was to put one foot in front of the other along his chosen path, without the help of blinkers.

Joaquim took his silence to indicate acquiescence. 'What was your impression of Rossi?' he asked, in the same tone.

'I honestly don't know. I didn't get much impression either way. Did you read the report of our last contact that I gave Armando?'

'I did. It was extremely useful. It's up to us to step in and act now.'

'Who's "us"?''

'Why, the Party. We ordered the stuff, and we're going to take delivery.'

'But Andrés knows when it's coming. He's been told the time and place. He's *bound* to be there.'

'We'll be there too. It's only a few days now.'

'But Diego was sent to meet him. Did you come to some arrangement?'

'That's our business. Matters of that kind have to be settled between Party members . . . And compatriots,' he added, after a moment's hesitation.

'I never doubted *that*. But I should have thought the Liberation Front and the guerrillas would have their bit to say.'

'They'll say it when the time comes. There's no need for you to worry about that.'

Only then did Frank grasp that he was being thanked for his services, that that was the whole purpose of this interview – the interview itself being his golden handshake: a tête-à-tête with the boss in person. A perfect

Secretary General for the change of key that's coming, thought Frank, as he looked at Joaquim. A solid man with no cheap swagger about him, despite the Young Turk image. And well-educated too: the keenest brain in the political bureau, so everyone said. All this and heaven too. Oh yes, the peace would be in excellent hands. But can a man win the peace who is quite so easily reconciled to losing the war?

Celia brought in the coffee tray. She glanced covertly at Joaquim, with a timid and protective look, but he wasn't watching her at all. There were two cups on the tray. Celia filled one, hesitated between the two men, and finally set it down in front of Frank: guests first. A heavy silence fell. Frank went and opened the window, then, suddenly turning back to them, he asked:

'Why was the rising in the city countermanded at the last minute like that?'

Joaquim heaved a sigh, and threw out his arms in that gesture of irritation and helplessness an adult makes when a child wants to know when the world began or why God made giraffes. But he said nothing. A moth fluttered down onto the patch of light on Celia's knee and stayed there.

'There suddenly wasn't any D-day any more – and no one explained why,' Frank persisted, not sorry to break the unwritten law that good militants must never bring up the past. He had never been able to obey it. Memory, bitter and often inconvenient, was like a yellow Star of David sewn onto his skin; it was an obsession. Part of his inheritance was a habit of retaining everything, saving everything, linking every event with the next – like a child with a dot-to-dot drawing. In this paradise of amnesiacs, this tiresome habit made him disapproved of, 'eternally suspect. A real nuisance. But, since they were getting rid of him anyway, and since he would never again find himself so close to anyone so important, he had nothing to lose. Not that he really expected an answer.

'It had to be cancelled. The arms didn't arrive in time, and then they got one of our workshops at the last minute. Then one of the army units that was supposed to be joining in ratted. It would have been a massacre.'

'But in the capital alone there were fifty groups of five ready, with five hundred individual weapons. And the district military committee was all set. In military terms it looked pretty good.'

'Enough to support the regulars, yes, but not enough to make a rebellion on their own.'

'But the rising in Paris in forty-four began with a lot less -'

'Yes, but don't forget Patton's tanks were only fifty kilometres away. This would have been more like the Warsaw ghetto -'

'Well, when they rose in Algeria on the first of November, all they had were shot-guns and tins of petrol.'

'You can only start an insurrection if the masses can be got to move. An insurrection is essentially political, and the balance of military forces depends on political conditions. Our contacts in the army had been arrested three days beforehand, and our trade unions were in total disarray. Conditions were completely against us.'

'Then why was D-day planned in the first place? Why was everyone prepared like that? Armando gave me the text of an appeal to the army - and a comrade is being tortured now because I asked him to print it for us.'

'We've got to keep our forces in training, and make the most of every advantage we get - fooling the enemy, and leading him on. And anyway, we were depending on a load of arms arriving by sea, and they were delayed by two misfortunes in succession: first a storm, and then the ship was damaged. These are things you can't foresee -'

'What use is the Party then?'

'The Party's got to ride the waves. Seize every chance. Victory is nothing but a series of plans that fail one after

another – then, suddenly, between two failures, there's a break, a crack, you jump in – and just pray to God that luck goes your way.'

'I know my Lenin too: Engage first, look afterwards. Actually, Napoleon said it first. But at least the Bolsheviki had a strategy.'

'No; what they had was an instrument: the Party. That's why it's so important.' (And of course, who controls the Party holds the handle of that instrument, Frank thought. Everyone else is subordinate.) 'If you've come here to take part in the liberation of Paris or the Warsaw rising you might as well turn round and go home. You'll be disappointed. There won't be any barricades – we haven't got paving stones here, and anyway, a whole street can be cleared by one tank. There won't be a great rail strike, either, with locomotives being blown up on the line, because we haven't any railways. And there won't be a postal strike, because our post office is a private, American-owned company with the best-paid employees in the country, who have their own organization instead of a union. And if you're expecting all the bells to ring, remember that our churches just have little electric bells to summon worshippers who live close by. And as for a call to arms – all the arms are on the other side. Or most of them, at least. All the heavy arms I mean. Andrés could have helped us out with them, but he'd rather stay in the woods.'

What Joaquim said was true. In this place noise and light were the stuff of daily life, of normalcy. All they could provide was shadow and silence, with their tunnels and underground caches, living like so many sewer-rats, with meetings when they could fit them in, and sorties against the enemy by night.

'You've got to be able to analyse prevailing conditions,' he went on. 'Martyrdom never proves anything. You know that.'

'Nor does all your analysing. Fidel hadn't read *Das Kapital* before he went up into the *sierra*.'

'That's no reason for us to forget all about Marx and Lenin – they can't be disposed of that easily. Unless you find something pretty good to put in their place. Hey, do you know what they're doing up there in the *sierra*?'- and Joaquim began laughing uncontrollably. 'They're making a close study of *Revolution in the Revolution*?! Can you believe it? So now the guerrilla group is the Party – poor buggers, there's no holding them since they've discovered that!'

There was no holding him either – but funny as he found it, it seemed also to anger him, and his laughter was more derisive than amused. Having recovered himself, he continued: 'America really has become the dump for all the world's misfits, hasn't it? Christ, I wish these tinpot philosophers would leave us in peace. Why can't they stay at home, instead of coming here to evangelize the Indians?'

'I certainly hold no brief for a Stalinist like Debray – in fact he represents everything I'm trying to get away from. But I suppose I'm a bit of a misfit myself –'

Joaquim reddened – for the first time he was obviously uncomfortable. His tongue had run away with him, and it wasn't going to be easy to unsay the damage. 'Sorry for that: of course I wasn't referring to you. It's just that we talked a lot about this in prison. All of us in the Party feel we've had our bellyful of visionaries, trotting out the same stale old ideas and calling it the New Left. Every day another of them discovers **America** for the first time. Makes you sick.'

'But you can't really blame Debray: he only put down in black and white what everyone was saying in private. After all, no one's forcing you to read him.'

'Perhaps not, but they force me to listen to him. Whatever time you tune into Radio Havana, someone's spouting the good word.'

'Well, it's no use complaining about Debray. It'd be more honest to make your complaint to Fidel; he's Big Daddy.'

'You're treading on delicate ground there. We mustn't wash our dirty linen in public. But if the great man goes *on* telling us we're cowards and opportunists and lame ducks, we're going to have to make some reply. Why doesn't he come and fight the guerrilla war here himself, if he thinks it's so important?'

'I'd attach more weight to Fidel than all the rest of you put together. He's very seldom wrong.'

'Listen. I was in Moscow in 1956. I've had enough papal infallibility. If I'm going to do something stupid I'd rather think it up for myself, in my own tiny mind. Not just copy it from Big Daddy *or* big brother. But perhaps you're too young to know what I'm talking about.'

There wasn't more than ten or fifteen years between them – certainly not enough for Joaquim to come the experienced elder statesman over Frank. 'Let's just say' I'm not part of the family. As you know, we were kicked out of it forty years ago – kicked in the pants quite unequivocally.'

'It's been a long exile, hasn't it?' and Joaquim smiled almost sympathetically. 'All past history now, though. Myself, I've got nothing against Trotskyists.'

'Don't worry. I'm a quite unofficial Trotskyist. I don't carry a Party card.' (But card or no, he thought, I'd rather be wrong with Fidel and Che than right with you. I've had as much of your realism as I can take – only I call it myopia.)

The man with the sub-machine-gun who had opened the door to them earlier now reappeared. Frank looked at his watch: one a.m. The audience was at an end. Someone else was waiting in another room for the next appointment. 'Celia will have to make more coffee, I suppose,' he thought. 'What a life!'

Joaquim stood up: he was certainly an impressive-looking man. The expression in his eyes said clearly that it was time for Frank to go, and he saw him to the entrance way, as far as the small inner door.

'You remember Manuel, I suppose?'

'Who's Manuel?'

'Celia *must* have spoken about him – he's the friend who was caught with the leaflet for the army –'

'Is he in the Party?'

'No. Why?'

'He's in the Front, then?'

'No. He's just Manuel; he's a friend of mine.'

'Is he a foreigner too?'

'How do you mean, a foreigner? He's an internationalist. He's Spanish.' Suddenly Frank didn't care what he said; he stood still and turned to face Joaquim, clenching his teeth: 'Wouldn't a campaign to free political prisoners be a good project for the mass movement? Humanitarian, democratic, suitable in every way. Or is there going to be a ban on saying that there *are* any prisoners of war now, in this new phase?'

'Keep your shirt on. There's no ban. It's only that it's better when a full-scale offensive is being prepared. Right now that's a job for the rearguard –'

'I don't care who does it, but Manuel *must* be freed. He's tough, but he's got a weak heart, and if they do too much to him, they'll kill him.'

'Yes, of course. We'll do what we can. There's someone waiting for me now. But you must realize that there are certain priorities. We have to put our comrades in the Party first. Good-bye.'

Celia was waiting for him in the garage, in the shadow by the wall. She looked very small, her head down, her expression listless. He went up to her and took her face in his hands; her eyes remained closed, and she tried to pull away, wavering a little on her legs, as though asleep.

Her sharp jaw-bones pressed into Frank's palms. He held her firmly, and in the end she started to cry – but shook her head, either to keep the tears back or to hide them from him. Suddenly she straightened up, lifting her head up and back, sharing her misery only with the uncomprehending concrete above. 'Take care of yourself,' she whispered, almost inaudibly. 'Take care, Frank.' And she slipped a tiny scrap of paper into his hand and darted away up the spiral staircase.

He recognized her writing at once: 'Armando: Félix-García Hospital, End building, Staircase C, Gastroenterology. *No one knows.*'

He got into the car without a word and let one of the men blindfold his eyes. His pride wasn't hurt at all this time. He wasn't even tempted to resist.

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Apparently he had drunk almost a litre of blood. Everyone in the top security section had contributed – a rather select group, but as red-blooded a lot as you could hope to find. Pedro took it from them with a syringe, during exercise time. 'Forearm please, clench your fist please, a prick, one, two, three.' The eight members of the political bureau all obliged, and in half an hour the measure was full.

Speed was the keynote. Joaquim was a fast worker, a man who never wasted a minute. Between the demands of security (restricting the work to a very few men, removing the rubble a little at a time) and the problems of ventilation, the tunnel plan would have taken at least a year. His nerves could not stand so long a wait. He was more impatient than you realized, Celia. Indeed, he was as impatient to escape to you as you were to open your arms again to him. Seriously I do realize how important it was politically; if something were not done soon to reduce the

amount of overtly 'fractional' activity of the Party's left wing, it would break up before it had time to make its flexible withdrawal. It was not for love of you, but for reasons of policy – to stop the Party's policy from dis-integrating, or to forge a new one – that he decided to attempt this short cut. Nothing would be lost; the two operations were independent, and should the dashing escape bid fail, the other, more serious objective would in no way be prejudiced. Quite the reverse: so romantic an act of despair would show the prison authorities that your hand-finished individual escapes service was still in business. A failure would hurt no one but Joaquim himself. But if he succeeded it would be as the representative of the Leadership, the emissary of the political bureau as a whole. Indeed, it might be said that his absorption of that blood-offering to which everyone had contributed was a kind of eucharist of propitiation, a mystical delegation of powers, an apotheosis of the principle of collective leadership – which was what some faithful militants actually did say afterwards. Other people, run-of-the-mill reactionaries, saw it as just those Marxist blood-drinkers having another black mass.

Anyway, he swallowed the fortifying draught at one go, with some tablets to bring down his blood-pressure. Anyone else would have spewed up the lot at once, but not Joaquim. The object was to turn him into a dying man, but not a dead one. He had to vomit clots of blood, clutching his stomach with every sign of being in intense pain. They chose the day carefully: it was a weekend, the best time for prisoners, since that is when the rest of the world relaxes. He drank the blood on the Friday evening, and the action was planned for Sunday. When the moment came, he flung himself about on the floor, moaning and gasping. The building was in an uproar, as all the prisoners in the political section (led by the members of the political bureau) loudly demanded that medical aid be brought in

at once. Joaquim was dying. Joaquim was dead. A lieutenant came with a stretcher party and on seeing them Joaquim made a superhuman effort. He couldn't make himself vomit properly, but he did produce enough faintly tinted sputum to carry conviction, so they took him off to the infirmary.

The commanding officer of the fort came to investigate in person, and then, miraculously, a splendid jet of black and clotted blood shot out all over the colonel's jacket, just as he was leaning over to examine the patient close to – and finding him far from attractive. The diagnosis was clear: 'Haemorrhage from a ruptured gastric ulcer.' He must be taken to the military hospital immediately. Let him go and die somewhere else, the brute, said the officer with sincere disgust; we don't want him here mucking up our uniforms and our polished floors. But the Minister of the Interior, who had to be consulted, refused to allow a transfer. Orders, counter-orders, general chaos. The general in command again applied to the minister, who telephoned the President at his swimming pool. He in turn telephoned to his own president, the US ambassador, but his English was still so bad (despite a crash course in a language lab) that the ambassador thought it was a question of poisoning the terrorist; and, since he was already in such a state – and provided the doctors would be responsible for the outcome – then surely the sooner the better. After all, tongues do wag, and journalists can make such unpleasant insinuations. In fact, they drank to the success of the whole affair at the embassy.

During all this telephoning back and forth, Joaquim had been brought to the military hospital, where the doctors had made preliminary tests. The first results were negative; but since the blood was by now pouring from his mouth, this seemed irrelevant. The Minister of the Interior sent his own police guard to take him back to the fort, but the

doctors who had arrived to deal with the emergency announced that, if he went, they would wash their hands of all responsibility and append a statement to that effect to the patient's notes. So the minister, a general himself (who had only listened with half an ear to the more accommodating instructions of the President, a civilian who was beginning to get on his nerves anyway), gave way, and authorized forty-eight hours' emergency treatment at the hospital, with a tripling of the security guards. And Joaquim found himself shut up on the eighth floor, in the section reserved for people due to be tried by military courts, where the only free bed happened to be in a cell with one other occupant. Under the mattress of the other bed lay fifty metres of nylon rope, a hacksaw-blade and a brand-new terylene suit. On top of the mattress lay José, a friend of Joaquim's. He was genuinely ill, but he was also a Party militant. And just the day before, José's wife had come up from the country to visit him, six months pregnant. Under her maternity smock she had brought these useful supplies, and when she left, she wore a cushion there instead. And this model wife (who would never dream of abandoning her husband, in prison far off in the city, even though she was fed up with the whole business of politics and guerrilla fighting, which she really didn't understand, because she came from a good family and was herself a devout Catholic) was – but of course – Celia.

A likely story, one would say. A gamble that couldn't fail, because there was Celia, the joker, fixing every deal. But I haven't made up a word of it. I saw Lucas the other day. He found it hysterically funny, and he confirmed all the scraps of information I'd gathered from other sources. (Though not from you, you silent joker.) But really, had I still been in any doubt as to whether Joaquim's escape could in truth have been like that, I need only have considered how exactly like a Buster Keaton film the whole

thing was. That farcical element, which is to be found in all the serious things of life and all the events that come to be labelled historic, never plays one false.

It took them two hours to saw through the top of one bar. And when they had done it, they found a place where some predecessor, either unlucky or ill-equipped, or perhaps recovered or dead before he managed to finish the job, had started to cut through from outside; invisible from inside, but they could have completed it in five minutes if only they'd seen it. They then had to bend the bar, which took them another two hours -- though that was partly because they were laughing so hard. José wanted to go as well, but he really was too ill; as Joaquim pointed out, his arms could never stand the tremendous strain, and he'd fall and be killed at once - which was patently true. They tied the rope to a drainpipe; Joaquim put on his suit; and the next thing, there he was, hanging a hundred and twenty feet up in the air, rather pale for an acrobat, the fresh air almost too much for him. It was 11 p.m. The patients were sleeping; the doctors were having it off with the nurses; the sentries were drinking or dozing. The only sign of life was on the fourth floor, where two old fellows chatting quietly in their beds suddenly sat up as they saw the startling vision of two feet, then two legs, then a whole man, dressed in his Sunday best, sliding past their window. They were on the point of calling for help, and ringing for the nurse, when Joaquim winked at them through the glass, making them his accomplices, holding a finger to his lips to request silence: immediately, automatically, they complied, with knowing smiles. Hard to know whether they complied from docility or mischief, whether they were joining in for the fun of it, or were only too pleased to be given an order to obey. There are people with a knack of inspiring immediate obedience (especially when abseiling down an unfriendly hospital wall), people who have an authoritative

ministerial way of looking at you. Joaquim was one, even in such disreputable circumstances as these. For all their astonishment, the two old men lay back on their pillows without a word, their lips sealed. They had seen nothing.

Seconds later, Joaquim landed, and José drew up the rope. Somewhat dazed, and not knowing the layout of the grounds, he started to wander round the hospital, going from one courtyard to another, vainly looking for the way out. At last, baffled, he went to the military police sentry-room, and asked the officer in command the quickest way to the car park outside. His unembarrassed admission that he was lost, backed up by a midnight-blue Cardin silk tie, made such an impression on the officer that he accompanied this distinguished visitor to the gate, thus dispensing him from having to show his false papers to the succession of disciplined sentries who stood to attention as they passed. Joaquim was shocked to the bottom of his efficient soul, and would dearly have liked to hand out reprimands all round for such slackness.

And so, my darling, feeling more nervous than you had expected, you saw him emerge through the iron gate, taking formal leave of the officer commanding the special security guard put there precisely in order to foil any attempted escape on his part. You must have found it hard to keep calm, for it seems that he had only just sat in the seat beside you when you drove smack into one of the armoured cars posted round the hospital, and your engine stalled. One would have thought that the whole thing had already long overstepped the limits of probability, and that prudence, if not decency, would have dictated that you go while the going was good. But Joaquim had the bit between his teeth now, and was not prepared to do any such thing. Angrily he marched up to the two soldiers dozing in the cab: What did they think they were doing? The precincts of a hospital were the last place for this sort of display of force. They ought to have more respect

for the patients who needed peace and quiet, *and* their anxious relatives, than to come and play war games all over the place. He would see that a complaint was made to the proper authorities. And so on. The upshot was that the crestfallen crew of the armoured car gave you and your Chrysler a tow to the nearest service station. There Joaquim at last condescended to hail a taxi, and you went off into town somewhere, for a well-deserved second honeymoon.

I hope I have got all the details right in my endeavour to reconstruct the escape of the century. The international press described it as a sensational political gamble, but, as I am almost alone in knowing, it was also the most glorious runaway marriage, a truly historic elopement. Even down to the rope ladder, Juliet spiriting away Romeo, and hiding him safely away.

I can just hear you saying, 'You must treat serious things seriously, Frank my friend. It would do you no harm to have a bit more Leninism and a bit less existentialism.' Or rather, I can imagine it, for I shan't actually be hearing your criticisms any more. It is quite true; I never did manage to adopt the correct tone. But, as a friend of mine once put it trenchantly, humour is the politeness of despair. Not that I should feel despair at your happiness: I'm lost in admiration of your lover's escape. The idea of the haemorrhage was brilliant: nothing less than the rehabilitation of the stomach ulcer (and it casts a new light on the whole career of Armando). I can only take off my hat to you both. If pushed, I might even murmur with the old Victor Hugo, 'Thank you for being so happy.'

Yes, thank you, you especially, Celia, for having put me at arm's length by getting away from me as you did. At last we escaped from that crazy whirligig in which we were spinning round so dizzily: I, loving you for your strength and yet unable to make you love me except by trying to assail your weak points; wanting you sovereign

and free, and yet only able to love you by making you dependent from time to time on your body. And you, not feeling bound in any way by such moments of weakness, but blaming me for any attraction you felt for me as a violation of your territory on my part, a blow to your independence. If it was just what I loved most in you that caused you to leave me, then how can I fail to love the absent you, and unreservedly? What you have done is to complete my education. You might even find you could love me now that you have another lover. And now that you've made me so much more presentable – though presentable to whom, if not to you, I do not know.

For there are only two forms of music that really mean anything: one is the whizzing of bullets past your ear, that endless chattering crackle of gunfire that suddenly makes you realize how miraculous it is to be alive; the other is the rolling of drums when you find yourself alone one night in what was only yesterday the bed where two soft-shelled bipeds eased the pain that lay between them. No one knows who he is, or how deep is the wellspring of his being, until he has undergone these two initiations into the experience of responsibility, vulnerability and perplexity that we call 'maturity'. I am reluctant even to use that word of solemn high nonsense – what clichés it evokes! All the received wisdom of the western, John Ford and Howard Hawks: the rough, virile tenderness of first shy love, a moving background behind, a burst of symphonic music, the door of the ranch-house closes, and a boy sets off on his horse into the setting sun, a tiny determined silhouette against a panorama of purple and gold. 'You'll be a man, my son.' The End. Yet it is true, for all that. Love and war do make men, for no better way has yet been found to lay bare the unrecognized capacity of little boys to *endure*. They are the two most likely, and inextricably associated, occasions for any human being to discover his own incompetence. Make love, make war:

you can't make one without the other. But far from *making* anything, you find that it is you who are being re-made. You expected to 'have' something, and at the beginning you had, but sooner or later, it is you that will be *had*. So alike are the two activities that in the end both must be conjugated in the passive: and basically, how much difference is there between being deserted by a human being you love and being shot at by one who doesn't love you? Only when you combine the two experiences can you understand either properly. For a time I lacked part of the puzzle. The screaming of the bullets along the low cement parapets of Lidice was unfinished business, a dissonance waiting to be completed by a final chord. Now I can say thank you, Celia, for rounding it off. Having run round and round after one another in love, limping and half-blind and worn out from playing an endless draw, we are now at last equals, in the same boat with all the other adult orphans. Now we are on the same side of the ultimate dividing line that marks off mankind into two irreducible classes (and every person knows at a glance to which he belongs): the smooth faces or the scarred, the confident, high voices or the faint and hesitant, the plump and well-fed rich or the poor who are all skin and bones, the smug intellectuals or those who are intelligent enough to recognize their own inadequacy. In other words, one side is for those who've taken knocks – from rifle-buttocks or fists, the government or Fate, or anything else that hurts; the other for those who have spent their lives beating the empty air like spoilt kids when they aren't allowed any ice cream.

All your life you have endured things – the rotting stench of real poverty, the heat and the damp, the hard seats of the orphanage, the mud of the shanty-towns, the *diktats* of a foreign empire, the sexual whims of men with power. I, who, until I knew you, had never endured anything at all, will from now on have to endure myself. We are on an

equal footing, so maybe the game between us will go better now. Your escape could well turn out to be our first real encounter.

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The whispering queue of visitors had dispersed among the corridors, into the wards and private rooms, with that hum of embarrassment peculiar to prison visiting-rooms and hospital entrance-halls: to places where fear and joy are so painfully intertwined, to those timed visits in which the awkwardness of meeting after a separation has hardly worn off when the awkwardness of saying good-bye makes everyone tongue-tied again. Frank was late, and rather puffed after chasing round a maze of stairways, courtyards, and bridges from one building to another. How he loathed the smell of hospitals, with its message: Infection. Keep Clear. It always had the same effect on him – he could actually smell the underlying decay.

Celia had forgotten to tell him what name Armando was using, and he did not recognize any of the patients in the ward. He couldn't ask the nurses or the other patients. There was just one doctor in the hospital, a comrade, who knew the secret, but of course Frank did not know which he was. He had to be extremely careful. He began to wander aimlessly along the corridors, going through various wards scrutinizing the patients. One could move round quite freely at this time of day, but too much coming and going might cause remark. On the second floor, just opposite the gastro-enterology ward, he came upon two policemen posted as sentries on either side of a half-open door, both dozing on their chairs. He managed to catch a glimpse of the person in bed: a kind of mummy, its face barely visible, bristling with tubes, and the arms, oddly short, resting on two boards. He suddenly recalled a paragraph he had read in the paper a couple of days ago,

and turning round, he passed the door again more slowly. It was a very young man, and he was crying, unable to turn his head aside. Their eyes met, and in the boy's he saw a look of misery veiled by a sort of humiliated indifference, as though he no longer really belonged to this world and was sorry to find himself still in it. Frank felt that sad gaze pursuing him down the hall. He was on the point of going out into the yard outside, when suddenly another image flashed into his mind: that man with glasses and a crew-cut just now, in the gastro-enterology ward. *Of course!* How could he have been so blind? He had passed the bed twice, and, as he now recalled, the man had each time had his face buried in a book. As usual, Frank had reacted too late. (We be slow folk in the Swiss mountains.) He broke out in a sweat, feeling both ashamed and angry with himself. The Armando he had known, dark, and never still for a second, and that washed-out shadow he had passed just now must have been travelling round inside his head for the past ten minutes without meeting. Or was it that he had not dared to recognize the shadow, as though his memory and his eyes had been blurred by an instinctive fear?

When Armando saw him coming, he started like a wounded animal: Frank felt as though he'd been caught publicly in some indecency. After all, even one's private life is not as private as such a clandestine death should be – a death accepted and even chosen: suicide by another name.

'I didn't recognize you. Did you realize it was me?'

'Whatever are *you* doing here, *misú*?' Not merely did Armando use the formal *Usted*, but he had to drive the message home by using that version of the aristocratic nineteenth-century *monsieur*, that was the locals' pejorative nickname for foreigners. Particularly white foreigners.

'I happened to be passing, so I thought I'd drop in and say hello.'

'You *misiús* are always so charitable. But the natives here don't really like charity very much.'

Without replying, Frank got a chair and sat down by the bed. Armando's frizzy hair had gone, and his eyes were surrounded now by great dark circles. Round glasses in metal frames, as worn by pre-war intellectuals, changed the appearance of his aquiline nose completely. How simple it is to turn into someone else! Or was it that he had a special talent for disguise? Armando was forty pounds lighter and looked twenty years younger: in his coarse nightshirt (hospital regulation wear) he looked like a phantom student, an adolescent ghost. Was he to have to lose every scrap of flesh before he could die?

'How did you find out?' The old voice was back, and with it their friendship.

'*Cherchez la femme!*'

'You've seen Celia recently, then, have you?' asked Armando, hesitantly. Perhaps he wondered how much Frank knew.

'Only briefly. No more roving for her – she's back on the rails now, and going straight.'

'If one only knew *where* she was going –'

'Well, she's certainly not going to take the veil tomorrow! But just think, if we put all the women in purdah, how would the leaders nanage? You wouldn't have a Party to lead if it weren't for them. Who else would carry all your messages?'

'I suppose you're right. I don't know whether I am a leader any more, though. I certainly haven't any message for you.'

Nor for anyone else. Only Celia was still visiting him, supposedly his younger sister. She was the only person he would see. Armando had cut all his ties with the Leadership, had slipped from his moorings, so to speak. Not so much because of the political differences between him and most of the rest of the political bureau, as because he had

become dully indifferent to all politics. Having come face to face with himself for the first time (and no doubt the last) other things had become peripheral. He had too much to say to himself, and hear from himself, to want to waste precious time listening to other people. Since the last unsuccessful operation, he had known he was dying. The tumour had reached his intestine, and the mere sight of solid food was now enough to make him want to vomit out anything still in his stomach. It was a long time since he had eaten meat, or anything with a trace of fat in it – even milk. On his bedside table an untouched plate of drying vegetable purée stood beside a faded photograph of a frail-looking boy with sad eyes. The most recent fibroscopy left no room for doubt: he would soon have to be fed by tube, and the end could be no more than a few weeks away. Meanwhile he was surviving with pain-killers and ever more frequent shots of morphine.

A folding screen had been placed between him and his left-hand neighbour, an old man now asleep and snoring. On his right there was a space which formed a kind of passage across the ward, dividing it into two; above it, through the half-open high windows, the tops of eucalyptus trees were visible. They could talk.

‘Why stay in here? It’s ridiculous. The Party would be glad to get you out.’

‘I like the company. There are twenty beds in this ward, so I’ve got nineteen friends. There’s no need to talk: we understand one another. If you’d spent two years in a cell by yourself without seeing anyone, you’d realize what that means.’

‘But you wouldn’t be alone if you came out, either. You know the Bulgarian Party Congress is about to take place in Sofia, and Celia tells me they’d like to send you as a delegate. You could be looked after over there till you’re quite well again.’

‘If that’s what you’ve come for, you’ll find the door at the

end there, on the right. No one'll stop you.' The pain-killers, far from mitigating his swings of mood, seemed to have aggravated them: short outbursts of voluble anger, followed by long periods of torpor. 'No, Frank. I'm not a travelling salesman with a nice line in revolutions. I've had enough of congress platforms – and all the sacred cows the Movement leads round from Sofia to East Berlin to Murmansk to Helsinki. I've got *some* dignity left. But perhaps that's hard for a Trotskyist like you to understand. I'd better belt up.'

'Look, Armando. The reason I've come to see you is because I want to try and understand.'

Armando shrugged his shoulders wearily, and gave a wry smile. Then he started to talk, very quietly: 'Okay, *missiú*. Try and understand this then' (as though to say, You asked for it). 'Long before you were born there was a thing called the International. It began with twenty or so crazy people meeting together in a freezing cold room in Moscow, because among them they had one theory and one purpose, and they were going to change the world. They knew it could be done, because they'd already begun – not where they should have begun, but they didn't really have any choice. When *those* people got up on a platform they did it to gain control of history, to work out tactics and methods of action – not to play the same old record to an audience of dozy officials. They came from all over the place: Czechs, Poles, Russians, Germans, Austrians, there was even one of your compatriots, Humbert-Droz. He went to deal with the Paris freemasons, and then they sent him to Buenos Aires to organize the Latin American Bureau. To preach the gospel to the savages, in other words – he was a clergyman too! So you see, you aren't the first.'

'Well, we Swiss are pretty useful, as long as people know how to use us.'

The painted walls threw back the dead, heavy heat.

No air-conditioning here: this was no expensive private clinic. Everything was white – the tiled floor, the walls, the ceiling, the beds, the staff. White like polished gleaming enamel – one's eyes became blurred looking at it for lack of any contrasting landmark. A cold white, not milky but ghostly, with none of the blue light of snow, or the purple depths of a lily: the frozen pallor of death, without depth or shadow, the shining emptiness that lets the dying know that from now on they will be on medical territory, straddling the border of human life, things not persons, organs for instruments to work on.

'In those days there was no difference between militants and leaders. They all mucked in together, all Bolsheviks, wherever they came from. In the days of Gómez, the Party in Caracas was even founded by a Yankee, and he paid for it like everyone else – twenty years in gaol. You know as well as I do what's happened since those days. You Trotskyists specialize in masturbating over the past, don't you? Well, it's sad but true that nowadays we communists only travel about to celebrate our mass. Apparently it sustains the faithful in their belief. Not my cup of tea, but all the same, I doubt if anyone can beat my record: I once recited the same litany at six different Party congresses in three months. Didn't have to change a comma, except for the name of the country – Austrian comrades became Japanese comrades, and so on. Everything else was word for word the same. My solo piece was billed as "Fraternal Greetings from the Delegate of the Centr... Committee of the Esteemed Party, etc." – and that's a formula we've used for thirty years too; every word of it is sacred. Any one of them could have given the speech instead of you, but they all clap and cheer as though they'd never heard it before. I mean it, Frank: it really is a Holy Communion, a sacred mystery. Once, when I was in Moscow, I suggested to Ponomarev that we could lighten the protocol a bit by standardizing the speeches; for instance, why not make a numbered list of

the various possible interventions? It seemed like a marvellous idea. Think how much time we'd save if people stayed in their places and just said: "Now, comrades, paragraph 237." Wild applause. Then the chairman replies: "In thanks to the esteemed delegates of the fraternal Party, I propose paragraph 144, sub-sections 1, 3 and 4 – sub-section 2 does not seem to apply in this case." In fact people could even press numbered buttons! Well, I'll tell you something in confidence: my suggestion was turned down. In fact the Soviet comrades went so far as to make a counter-suggestion, in writing, over my head, to my own Party Leadership. They suggested I be sent to a psychiatric hospital. They were quite right. I *was* ill. But not mentally ill, I'm afraid; it was in my gut that the trouble was.'

In the silence around them, his voice sounded quite loud, but his neighbours dozed on, unheeding; no doubt they were inured to noise. The sun was still bright outside, and shining among the eucalyptus leaves it fell through the window and spangled the sheets with geometrical patterns of light. As it moved, Armando's face was suddenly cast into shadow.

'Parliamentary cretinism is a national sport in Europe, isn't it? Well, it's as nothing compared with the cretinism of international conferences. Congresses of solidarity, talks, sessions, symposiums, top-level discussions, meetings: we've been at it for years. We've even got professional speech-makers: the association of all-purpose congress-goers – good orators, good arse-lickers, super salesmen. I should know. I was a fully paid-up member. One great big happy family: white, black, yellow and every possible combination. We met each other wherever we went – same airports, same luxury hotels, same platforms. We never went hungry, but we went round the world making speeches on behalf of the wretched of the earth. We migrated like birds: we all moved at once, and we landed in

flocks (depending on the season) in Geneva, or Prague, or Vienna, or Cairo, or Helsinki, or Moscow, or Algiers, or Dar-es-Salaam. You name it. We congratulated one another on appointed dates, at one congress after another: Numismatists for Justice, the Peace Movement of Deserving Youth, Enlightened Engineers, Progressive Night-watchmen, Householders for Universal Disarmament, and God knows what else. To say nothing of the Afro-Asian conferences, the mono-, bi-, tri- or quadri-continental conferences, the leagues, and unions, and federations, and associations, and common fronts – each one with preparatory meetings, and then plenary meetings, and then commemorative meetings. Not forgetting the eighty-three Communist or Workers' Parties and their biennial congresses – if you just went to those you'd be travelling almost once a week. But once you've put a foot on the conveyor belt, everything else is done for you: you become a delegate, or a guest, or an adviser. Last time, in Leipzig, there was a magnificent Archimandrite whom I could swear I'd seen a week before in Nicosia dressed as an Anglican clergyman. I wanted to pull his beard and make sure! That's what's left of the great world-wide army of the proletariat after fifty years – an International of spongers. An Association of Travelling Windbags. I'll let you have Sofia if you'll give me Peking. *Quid pro quo*. Always ready to do you a good turn, brother. The etiquette is quite strict, and all the delegates know their place in the hierarchy, but each one makes his own way – and the grub's the same wherever you go: eggs and bacon, fruit juice, toast and butter, pancakes and syrup at eight a.m. There's very little difference between the West and the East – except that in the East it's wisest to stay close to the dining-room in the Grand Hotel for foreign delegations. Would that I'd taken my own good advice!

'Do you think that's where you picked up your acidity?'

'You know what Sihanouk said to me, at some congress

or other of non-aligned nations? "If I send my students to Paris on scholarships, they come back communists, and if I send them to Moscow, they come back supporting the West." Well, I've made my choice. I'm not going to Paris, or Moscow, or Peking any more. I'm staying here with people like myself. Where I'm comfortable.'

He was fighting for breath, words indistinct, sentences jerky. And with a kind of frenzy that drove him into fits of coughing. But now he seemed suddenly calmer. Released. As though with all that mocking talk and shooting his own shadow he had managed to spit out what was troubling him. All of us carry our own worst persecutor inside us, be it a clown or a devil. But surely Armando had never been this former self he was so fiercely stabbing with his words. The ghost he was exorcizing seemed to be the precise opposite of himself. Frank was puzzled. Then, suddenly, a picture floated into his mind. Armando read his thoughts:

'You know who that boy is over there with the police guard? I'll tell you. He's a lad from the MIR. We'd put him in that special unit I told you about. At least, when I say "we" I mean "I" - I'd got hold of a flat where we could manufacture explosives under a chemical engineer from the Party. He was actually living in it. . . '

Each word was a separate effort. Like pulling the plaster off a wound. He spoke in a jerky whisper.

' . . . One evening he decided to carry on with the work by himself. He wanted to grind up some sort of chlorite, and he decided to do it in a saucepan, or with something metal - I don't know what fool thing it was. Anyway, the whole thing blew up in his face. The police came at once. They had to cut off his hands. Luckily he was the only person in the flat -'

'Does he know you're here?'

'No, he doesn't know me. But I know him. And the bastards have put him where I can't help seeing him.'

'I see why you don't want to go and disport yourself by the Black Sea.'

'Oh yes, I can't leave now. I've gone too far to abandon my wounded comrades: I could never look myself in the face again.'

Dying animals instinctively want to get away from the herd – but Armando was returning to his. It was an odd form of camouflage, in broad daylight. Solitary confinement in the middle of a public ward. For a man who has lived underground to die so publicly, disguised as a bank clerk – was it shame, or one final alias?

'What the hell do you do in here all day?'

'Try to understand this damn country. Recognize this fellow? *He* understood it.' The picture showed a tiny colossus, a skinny, El Greco type dandy, with curly side-whiskers and an elegant moustache: though the artist had clearly been out to flatter him, the Libertador presented a dismal picture – the knight of the sorrowful countenance. 'And look at this – the birthplace of my country,' and Armando handed him the book, open at a faded photograph: a low Andean house with round tiles on the roof, two windows with Spanish wooden lattice work and a door with shutters. Nothing special – a dull little house under a sky as grey as the land around it.

'Is this where you were born? They should put up a plaque!'

'Ha, ha. No, this is the house where General Bolívar signed the decree for *la Guerra a Muerte*, in June 1813. You can still see it if you go there.' Armando, transported, began to declaim the speech Bolívar had made.

Frank could almost see the wind of the high plateaux blowing bits of kapok past Armando's eyes, and yellow tufts of *frailejón* – the stuff of childhood memories. He was an Andean, like all the *hombres fuertes* of his country; he had grown up on the *páramos*, those great desolate moorlands, with their sprinkling of thorn-bushes and aloes,

and fleecy saponaria as high as sugar-cane, where villages long since abandoned are hidden under purple *bucare* flowers and the black seed-pods of flamboyants, and the white roughcast of the old colonial fortified churches stands out dazzling in the sun – churches with no stained glass, no windows even, Jesuit bunkers with only the tiniest loop-holes in their long-silent bell-towers.

‘You know something else he said: “Even if he fights under the tyrant’s standard against me, no American can be my enemy!” I’ve always said compatriots should never shoot one another. It’s too painful.’

In other words, thought Frank, ‘Even if he fights with me under the flag of freedom, no European **can** be my friend.’ That’s for sure. Yet he felt a certain envy for this communist with his feet so firmly, and proudly, planted in his own backyard. Somewhere between Paris, Prague and Moscow, Armando, like many of his ancestors, had become aware that he was a South American; he had despised the provincial in himself, but suddenly he found the cosmopolite less attractive still. One’s own country, the life-raft of the drowning man. So now they were passing one another (on their return journeys, so to say) only to lose sight of one another again at once. (‘I used to think I had no country, either, that frontiers meant nothing, and I had to cross the Atlantic to discover that my home was on the other side of it; but unlike my neighbour on his raft, it is too late for me to get under sail again.’) What was the point in arguing? There’s no debating a dream, even though one day it may disturb our future.

Frank took the heavy volume from his hands, and leafed through it till he found the passage he wanted: ‘Here you are, here’s your hero’s testament: “He who serves a revolution ploughs the sea. . . The best thing to do in America is to leave it. . . This land is doomed to fall bit by bit under petty tyrannies.”’ But the words stuck in his

throat. He could not bring himself to read them through to the end. 'Have you heard from your wife?' he asked, changing the subject. (But perhaps the echo of the sentences he had read was as bad as what he had left unread.)

'Not a word. But they brought my son in the day before yesterday. He'll make a good militant, I think. I hope the Party will look after him. You saw this photo of him, didn't you? I looked like a kid begging for pennies at that age, too.' For a short time, Armando the man was visible; Armando the political outlaw had taken off his iron mask, and the black mask of death was soon to take its place; but in this brief interval, one could see a glimpse of the skin below. 'I hope to hell they bring him up in his own country. I want him to grow up straight with his feet on the ground.'

All illness strips the grease-paint off. This one had laid bare the real face of Armando: the face of a father, perhaps a lover, and certainly a son. Son of his land and its myths, of that extravagant history of galloping horsemen, slave revolts, and failed conspiracies that Latin Americans share with each other but no one else. Not that revolution had ever been stage make-up for him, in any sense: he would have been quite prepared to live and die in it. But was the Revolution ever really anything other than a will to return to one's source, in independence of spirit and fidelity to oneself? What could give all these Sisyphean heroes the strength to keep pushing their stones uphill but the intoxication of discovering their own identity? Even though to do so they had to take up guns against the world. In this place, Marxism was first and foremost simply a means of building a nation. Frank, who still liked to believe that history had some tricks up its sleeve, had long clung to the idea that the nationalism of the dependent countries would provide the world proletariat with a heaven-sent instrument for establishing its emancipating dictatorship.

Meanwhile, however, the inmost soul of the guerrillas would still be Bolívar: Marx, Lenin and Trotsky were only their outward weapons. Bolívar was just making use of Marx to win his own posthumous triumph. But, if that were so, what was a nomad like himself doing here? A naïve *misiú* who had signed on under the red flag, only to find that he was really fighting for something quite different.

Evening was creeping into the ward. A nurse walked down the aisle to indicate that visiting-time was over. Death flickered on the ceiling above, like the shimmering of a stream through the bushes where European children find their dreams of adventure in the summertime. 'Neither the sun nor death can be looked at steadily,' said La Rochefoucauld; Frank tried to catch a glimpse, squinting at the shifting light that corrugated the wall. Suddenly, he felt a need to escape. Turning his eyes away, he stood up:

'I must be going, Armando. Anything I can do for you?'

Armando hesitated, opened his mouth, then thought better of it. Finally he replied, 'Do you really want to do something for me? Take these papers; take them away and destroy them.' From under his pillow he drew out a cheap plastic school satchel, stuffed with a disorderly mass of papers.

'What's this?'

'My files - or what I've managed to save of them! Articles, letters, copies of interventions to the central committee. Don't read them - please. Then there's the rough draft of my book, you know, *Foresight and Prophecy in Historical Materialism*: you can look through that if you like. I know you're interested in the idea - God knows we've talked about it enough. But you must *swear* you'll destroy it all afterwards.'

'But why? when you've worked on it for years!'

'Swear to me, Frank, swear by whatever you hold sacred.'

'Lenin or Bolívar – whichever you prefer.'

'We'll combine the two – Che –'

'Okay. I swear on the head of Che. But it'll leave you with nothing. Suppose you want to re-read it some day?'

'What would be the point of that?'

Frank took possession of the satchel and walked away without another word. But he hadn't gone three paces when Armando called him back in a hoarse whisper: 'Frank . . . About Celia. . .'

'Yes?'

'You *must* try to understand.'

'Oh, I understand all right.'

'The Party needs her, Frank. And the Party's got to come first, when it comes to the crunch. That's something we really do agree about, isn't it?' His gaze was anxious and beseeching; his hand clutched Frank's, then dropped again.

'Of course it is, Armando. We agree absolutely about that.'

★★★★★

Frank sat up all that night devouring the manuscript. It was over four hundred closely written pages, with endless crossings-out and notes scribbled in the margin. He had not read like that for years. Not since the days when he took Marxist theory so seriously that he read nothing else. As a French speaker, he had always thought of himself as a man of universal culture; and believing he was a citizen of the universe, he had stayed in a single province. That night he discovered the extent of his ignorance: a whole world of writers he did not know – the young Lukács, Korsch, Preobazhenski, Pannekoek, Adorno, Horkheimer, Gramsci, Della Volpe. For Armando, knowing that he lived in a province, had naturally worked his way out to the universal. He spoke German, Russian, Italian and

French. As a friend of Lukács and Togliatti, he was as much at home in the intellectual world as the political, though quite unselfconsciously, for he was far too modest a man to parade his learning or his friendships. But the depth of his thinking was tremendous; and the irony: the way he could use his classics to contradict one another. Frank had never read anything like it. Any one page would have fuelled the fame of a Marcuse for several decades (except that the Frankfurt School was shot down in flames in the first chapter).

By dawn Frank was punch-drunk – and at once dazzled and depressed: he had given his word, yet a masterpiece like this ought to survive. He wondered if there were *any* way of getting round his promise, but then he remembered Armando's last commanding and imploring look, and realized he must not think of it. To make any part of Armando public would be a betrayal. He had already had his life taken from him, and, if that was what he wanted, he must have his work taken too. He must be an absolute blank, an absence without beginning or end.

With the manuscript under his arm, Frank went out into the deserted early-morning street. Some hundred yards along he came upon a dustbin. Not tearing or disarranging the pages, he laid the bundle on a heap of old newspapers and put back the lid. The dustmen would soon be along. With this artful manoeuvre he felt at peace with himself. He had kept his word, and chance alone could decide whether he should be forsworn: some self-educated road-sweeper, someone who happened to wander past the dump, some Diogenes living near it, might chance upon his life's work and rescue it. Then, after all, the vultures and children and dogs would not be fighting over these bits of paper. There was one chance in a hundred thousand that it might turn up in fifty years' time, at the back of a second-hand shop somewhere, between a pile of ship's logs and a collection of old *Reader's Digests* – the work of

some unknown Nostradamus with the curious sub-title, 'Dialectics and Time'. But in fifty years' time, thought Frank, philosophy like this will be Greek to everyone; the language of Marx will be as inaccessible as Aramaic. This final reflexion completed the easing of his conscience.

Not till he was home again did he remember that he had left all the personal papers behind. He set about tearing them up conscientiously – into two, then four, then eight. One page slipped to the floor, and as he picked it up he glanced at it. An outline for an article, it seemed to be:

As Lenin said, terrorist actions are both a result and a symptom of lack of trust in the insurrection, of the absence of the right conditions for the insurrection. They are marked by vengeance against isolated individuals, and action for action's sake, unrelated to the true state of mind of the masses. They paralyse, waste and divide the forces of the revolutionary movement.

Revolutionary violence is one thing; uncontrolled, disorganizing and semi-anarchist petty bourgeois terrorism quite another. Revolutionary violence is part of a total action subordinated to political ends; it corresponds to a mounting phase in the revolutionary movement. Anarcho-terrorism is an irresponsible action which does not relate to the national situation, which assists not the revolutionary movement, but its enemies.

If we do not check such tendencies, which expose the revolutionary movement to isolation and defeat, we shall be unable to make any headway in our struggle against imperialism and the reactionary government of Acción Popular. . .

He then picked up another page – and recognized Celia's writing. It seemed to be part of a torn-up letter. Had Armando meant to leave it among this already yellowing heap of papers?

. . . you didn't approve of my having the abortion (thanks for the address anyway, it couldn't have been easier). But how could I have tied myself to a man like him by having his child? He says he's a Trotskyist sympathizer, but he's never said exactly what his political creed is. His positions are incredibly

fluid, always changing, and he only uses his theoretical knowledge to justify whatever he feels at the moment. It's a mistake to have given him so much responsibility in the Front. The fact that he's a foreigner doesn't bother me (it's hardly for *us* to be narrowly nationalistic!) nor does his ideological eclecticism. You told me once that he was a left-wing revisionist. I'm not very well up in all this, and you know more than I would. But Joaquim warned me to be careful, and that's enough for me. Frank is working with us, but that's as far as it goes. As a person I like him very much, and he'll always be my friend, but no more than that. The main problem is that he doesn't seem to appreciate the battle we're going to have to fight against Andrés's divisive manoeuvres and anarcho-adventurism. That really worries me, and I'm afraid he . . .

Frank sat back. The thought of the child. Still more, her phrase; 'He's never said exactly what his political creed is', went round and round his head. When did she ever ask me? She never told me she was pregnant, either. 'Creed' indeed! Why didn't she insist on hearing my confession, and making me recite the seven sacraments of the Party and the Stalinist mysteries of faith? It was a pretty funny word to come from the pen of anyone quite so irreligious. What a revealing slip: the poor buggers were still stuck in the Spanish lobster-pot. A wonder they didn't insist that I formally abjure all heresy in the forecourt of the central committee. Maybe I *am* something of a heretic, but my God, they're the bloody Inquisition. Okay. Here goes. I'll give you my creed, in the unexpurgated version, the one you put on your Index of Forbidden Books many years ago. We each have our own faith, Pope Celia, and my creed is anything but orthodox.

He took a sheet of writing paper (it was from the pad she'd left on the table when she went away).

I believe in the invisible rotting of souls and the disguised nothingness of bodies. I believe in Life and its sovereign power to efface, to fill up, to cover over . . .

The angry, exultant words tumbled eagerly off his pen; or rather, perhaps, they rose up as though longing for revenge, as though they had been bowing their heads in the depths of his soul for far too long:

... in the burial of friends by their friends, and of lovers by those they love, amid drinking and laughter. I believe in the healing of all wounds, and the dying away of desire and anger. In one true love replacing another. I believe in perjury, in breaches, in prevarication. In the transience, indignity and cowardice of what we call the business of survival. In the sobering down of the ardent, and the subsiding of even the greatest uprisings. In the endless re-cycling of births and murders, in camps and burial grounds flattened out by oblivion as the sand by the incoming tide. In sufferings that leave no trace, signatures in colourless ink, fury that is impotent. Greetings, comrades, whose carcasses the dogs and vultures are fighting over as they lie rotting in those refuse dumps beside the highways. Let me assure you that we know your sacrifice is literally useless: you have died solely to please yourselves. Let me assure you that there will never be any empty seats on the world train, whether we are still on it or not. Oh, my unforgettable comrades, even the wind has already forgotten you. You thought you were so irreplaceable, yet your places have already been taken. There are never any gaps in the morning roll-call. Greetings!

He read it over. It had a determinedly ecclesiastical tone; one could smell the sulphur and the burning faggots. And a certain pretentious emphasis, too, which was a good thing. A little bombast always comes in handy at the end of a large political meeting. But perhaps not quite the sort of profession of faith one would expect from prospective Party candidates for the town council. No. Not what is wanted in the new phase. We must try to be positive.

He tore off a fresh sheet. We'll show them what stuff (inflexible and Leninist) we're made of:

Comrade Celia,

I address this to you, but it is for all the members of the political

bureau, especially Comrade Badilla. As a member of the National Liberation Front, of which your Party is one of the mainstays, I think it is my right to make my views known in the proper quarters. I should of course be going through the normal channels, but since Armando's illness and your own disappearance, I have lost contact with them.

It is evident that the failure of the planned insurrection and the results of the recent electoral farce have led your present Leadership to reconsider the resolutions of the last plenum of the central committee.

In my view you are right on one point only: we here are on the verge of being totally crushed. To prolong the urban fighting would represent a sterile and indeed suicidal voluntarism. The masses would not follow us. But it would be dishonest of me to conceal my disagreement in other respects:

1. Your volte-face will demoralize the masses still further and your unexplained zigzags provide even your own militants with a lesson in scepticism and cynicism. To say one thing one day and the opposite thing the next shows a lack of respect for the rank and file and for all those who have collaborated with you. You will therefore bear considerable responsibility for the period of revolutionary decline we are now entering. . .

2. The rising tide brought you up, and the ebbing tide carries you down again. You are at the mercy of events: the fact that you could pass in a month from the most fervent insurrectionalism to the most insipid electoralism shows clearly that the only way you could rectify a left-wing opportunist deviation was by an upsurge of right-wing opportunism.

(All these words ending in 'ism' gave it a good serious ring. Whether it actually meant anything was another matter. But in a case like this, it was the vocabulary that mattered, not the meaning. He continued:)

3. In the history of the workers' movement there have been some defeats that were valuable, not to say indispensable, for the lessons the proletarian vanguards learnt from them. This is not one of them. Not merely did we not take the armed struggle as far as we could have, but it may reasonably be doubted

whether your Party will ever learn anything from the consequences (theoretical or practical) of our failure.

4. For proof one need look no further than the argument whereby you justify your volte-face: that the unity of the Party is more important than anything else. Since when is the unity of the Party an absolute? How far would Lenin or Trotsky or the others – especially Fidel – have got if they'd had to bow to that as a sacrosanct principle? You were able to disregard it earlier, when you launched the Party into the armed struggle in the first place; it's a bit of a con-trick to go back to it now.

I thought what I was joining was a revolutionary Front. Not just a common-or-garden coalition of social democrats. It's hardly worth coming to America for that – we do that sort of thing better in Europe. Which is why I support the consistent positions defended by Comrade Andrés. It won't be long before the masses realize which is their true vanguard

With communist greetings,

Frank

A bit stilted. She'll think I don't care at all any more.

He took another sheet of paper, and without pausing for thought, wrote in a large sloping hand:

Celia my love,

You were right: there was no future in it. Give Joaquin a kiss from me. And make sure he gives you a child – the one you wouldn't have by me. Call him Manuel: that'll make me happy wherever I am.

Love,

Frank

There was only one envelope left, and all three sheets of paper lay on the table in front of him. He hesitated among them, and finally put them all in together. Among them they told the truth: they must, for they contradicted one another. All the messages were Frank, Frank in pieces that didn't fit together. He agreed with those who thought it possible (and necessary) to give new impetus to the war by gradually building up a people's army in the *sierra*. But he had neither the inclination nor the capacity to put

up with the boy-scout routine of a guerrilla camp, with its dreary programme of daily chores (guard-duty, cooking, collecting water, cutting wood, cleaning the guns). He knew he would never learn to sleep in a hammock – he couldn't sleep on his back for one thing, and he would never master the knots. Much as he loathed this town, he could not live anywhere else. He was still by way of taking part in the struggle, even though he knew it didn't need him (nor he it) to help with its final collapse. He wanted to help Andrés, yet though he couldn't make up his mind to join him, he didn't want to help from a distance: he did not want to be like so many others who had given their names but would not risk their lives. He was in love with orthodoxy, yet he welcomed the proliferation of splinter-groups as a triumph. He would have liked to die with Celia, yet he was urging her to live. He wanted nothing more intensely than to live on after death in another human being, yet he believed in nothing more certainly than in annihilation.

Pity, he thought as he licked the envelope. I shan't have time to reconcile my ambitions. But perhaps it's just as well. If that was what I'd wanted, I'd have made time – with a job, and a house, and a family. With real identity papers, all in order. I wouldn't have come to this country at all. And if I hadn't come, I shouldn't have met Celia. And if I hadn't met Celia, I would never have discovered how mad I am. I'd have been just an ordinary hack writer, with carefully kept notebooks expanded into carefully written books. And in the end I would actually have written my long-planned Essay on the Meaninglessness of History – perhaps I should even have signed it! Then, with my apostrophes to Celia (written after the event, of course, and in her absence) and the notebooks I've filled up week after week since coming to this country, I'd have had the makings of a short novel. Just like everyone else. When you come to think of it, I've had a lucky escape.

Thanks again, Armando. For the last time, thanks for all you've taught me. Thanks for showing me the Way: salvation by fire. Or by the dustbin. There's not much to choose between the two.

Diego's Story

No one heard him coming. Victor is like a wild cat with little yellow eyes.

'Damn. He always chooses the worst moment,' William said, getting out of his hammock and trying to fight his way into his boots. What he meant was the best moment. For the two of us were watching a marvellous spectacle: they were quartering the last of our game and skinning it. For the previous ten days we'd only had one corn-cob and one boiled banana each per day, and our stomachs were dancing a jig. We'd spent the entire morning debating whether to roast or boil it: with meat of this sort it was always a problem. It was a long-tailed monkey with a head like a sly old man (no bigger than my fist); more rubbery than chicken; rather like duck that's a bit past its prime. In the end Andrés settled it, and sent Tulio to the stream to fill the saucepan: he was worn out, having wasted three trips by spilling the lot each time. I was a bit shaky myself – in fact we all were. It had taken me half an hour to get the wood, cutting two rotten branches with a machete, and collecting up three others, and even that left me exhausted. My mouth had been watering for my helping of monkey since the morning. It's so humiliating being hungry – you can think of nothing else. It wears you down and numbs you like an obsession – it's in your mind, not your stomach. You all sit there dreaming: of steak, of fresh bread from the oven, of chocolate bars, whatever you fancy most. The slightest movement is an effort: you feel as though you're a ton weight, even though you're all skin and bone. You people have no idea what it's like.

Terry can tell an animal by its smell, with his eyes shut. You're like an animal yourself by the time you've lived in the forest for a couple of years, with lynx eyes and even a lynx sense of smell. While he was on guard in the dark he shot three monkeys – holding his torch along the barrel of his gun. Andrés was going to punish him for this breach of security, but the rest of us stopped him; it was our first edible meat for ages, and considering how much trouble we had finding the camp ourselves whenever we left to explore, it seemed unlikely that army scouts would be patrolling within earshot of our guns. We were in the midst of a tangle of lianas and piles of rocks, where certainly no human foot had trodden before.

But Victor had slipped past our sentries, and that really was bad. Andrés was appalled. We hadn't moved camp for a month (though normally we never spent more than two or three days in one place). He'd even allowed us to conserve energy by leaving our hammocks and blankets up in the mornings. Some comrades' feet were swollen and blue and wouldn't fit into their boots, and Jaime for one couldn't get his finger round his trigger any more. Men in that state were allowed to sit on sentry duty. But it took them twenty minutes to cover the hundred yards between their hammocks and the lookout post. I once watched William with my lantern (his hammock was the next one down from mine): he had to go on all fours. With oedema in your hands and feet, you don't feel any pain. Your body is like a balloon that can't be let down, but the slightest scratch becomes infected, and then gangrene sets in, for the body has no defences any more. It isn't strictly speaking hunger that guerrillas die of.

Andrés congratulated me: 'Your hardware's arrived at the pick-up point, Diego. The Front keep their promises. If only the Party play straight with us we'll be in the clear. . .' We questioned Victor thoroughly before sending him to rest (he'd started back with just a tin of sardines,

as soon as he'd seen the stuff landed, and walked for thirty hours without stopping to bring the news). Andrés showed him the large-scale map to confirm the landing place – quite hard to locate, one kilometre east of the river-mouth. They had got the place right then, even if they were a few days late in the time. This precision was something of a surprise, since there had been no radio instructions from the shore. Anyway, we must get down there as soon as possible, to minimize the risks. It was a race against time, in other words. Or perhaps against the Party. Victor was allowed two hours' sleep. Time to get that bloody monkey soft enough to eat, though it was still as tough as old boots. Monkeys have a queer sour taste, as if their sweat stayed inside their skins.

It took us three days: a procession of hunchback tramps, staggering along in Indian file. The forest has a kind of underwater light, like a thick green jelly, and there's no dawn or dusk. You go forward unable to see, almost bent double under the weight of your pack. And, just occasionally, a beam of sunlight comes through a hole in the leaves at you, like a blinding spotlight. I suppose we must have looked pretty funny, with all our kit loaded on any old how; some of us had real rucksacks, but most had potato sacks with makeshift straps. Ragged – but not barefoot. Privileged people like me, from the city, had rubber boots, only ankle high, but solid. The soles were planed down with a file to make our footprints unrecognizable (if anyone should see them it'd look as though some peasants had wandered further afield than usual). The countrymen had made themselves cloth espadrilles with soles cut out of old tyres, and a spare pair in their packs. Above the feet, our clothing was less conventional. The only things that matched were our olive-green cotton socks, two pairs each, which came from some army stock we found in a goods van when one of our mines blew up a train. Everything else varied with the individual, but it all ended up

the same colour, somewhere between khaki and verdigris, a combination of mud and mildew. As for head-coverings, they included black berets, peaked caps, straw sombreros, ancient trilbies, army forage caps, rusted oil-workers' helmets. Any bird (or plane) that flew over would take us for a bunch of gypsies. I bet that's one the Vietnamese haven't thought of – second-hand hats as camouflage!

Normally we find tracks of some kind, but this time we went the shortest way, straight up and down the slopes. Victor went ahead to show the way, and the advance party followed him, widening the path with machetes. We had to scale sharp rocks, finding minute cracks to get our toes and fingernails into; there was no point in keeping a distance between yourself and the next man, for if one fell the next was bound to follow. You had to choose between keeping close to the man in front and seeing where he put his feet with the risk that he'd fall on top of you, or letting him go ahead and risk missing the best hand- and foot-holds. Branches kept swinging back and hitting you in the face. Your gun barrel kept getting caught up in the lianas, and they entangled you and throttled you like great rubber bands. All the fallen tree-trunks were covered in wet moss and very slippery – it was hard to keep your balance on them, and they always seemed to crack just when it came to your turn. You kept tripping over stones and roots, and when you put out your hand to save yourself it would come away full of thorns, as though you'd picked up a sea-urchin. Sweat kept running down into your eyes, and you'd lick it with your tongue because you vaguely hoped it would make you less thirsty. And the coral snakes going for your ankles – God help you if you couldn't get out your machete in two seconds flat.

There were some fabulous moments though: the coolness of a banana grove, or an impromptu bathe when you had to cross a stream and the water came up to your chest (though it was tempting not just to give up then, and

float away on the current). Times when you halted in the shade and you'd had no water since the day before, and you found there was still a little drop left in your gourd. There's a technique you have to learn: what you have to do is first wet your lips, then take a mouthful under your tongue, and swill it from side to side, and rinse your gums with it, and keep it in your mouth till it's gone, letting the water dissolve of itself. People in the city have no idea what water can mean – it's baptism, it's paradise. Best of all is to keep a lump of rock salt in your pocket, and rub it over your tongue before you drink: the salt holds the water, and then you don't get dehydrated so soon.

Halts are dangerous. You must have one every two hours, that's the rule, but you can't be sure you'll manage to start off again. We all fell asleep without meaning to on the second day. We must have slept for a quarter of an hour or more. All flat out on the ground, snoring in unison. We hadn't even posted a sentry. Forty-five guerrillas, sleeping like babies with their guns at their feet. A couple of soldiers could have captured the lot of us. Or we might never have woken up at all – there are places like that where you can't afford to go to sleep. You know how, if you fall asleep in the snow, on the steppes, you're turned into an iced statue, guaranteed unbreakable till the spring. And in the desert you become a little heap of sand and bones, and blow away in the wind. Well, the jungle is even quicker. A sleeping man can be reduced to a slimy puddle in a day – the jungle seems to digest him. It doesn't kill things; it just swallows them up. The plants live a kind of fermenting animal life: the liana creeps, the moss is crawling with movement, tree-trunks and leaves prick and bite and gnaw and salivate, devouring each other (and you in the process) in a deafening silence. The jungle grows by feeding on itself. When you're there you see that people are really just mushrooms on legs, a kind of walking fungus. To say nothing of all the ticks and mosquitoes

and flying leeches that keep landing on you, and depositing their larva or shit or bacteria or bits of themselves under your skin. (I'll never forget the time my arse was burrowed into by something once – they became caterpillars in time, and then chrysalises, and three weeks later Goro – our doctor – devised an exit for them by widening the holes they'd dug in my skin – agonizing, without anaesthetic! – and a swarm of blue and yellow butterflies flew out of my backside. And off they went, back into their forest – *my* butterflies, flesh of my flesh, my blood-relations!)

But it isn't always funny. If you get too exhausted, your instinct for self-preservation seems to go too. The time comes when you *don't want* to get up again. You'd rather let yourself be softened up and digested by this putrid earth; you'd be quite happy to curl up like a contented baby in its great lap, and abandon yourself to the engulfing swamp.

And if you stop too long, you start thinking. That's fatal. Why are we here? Why the *hell* are we here? Transported convicts, or slaves in the salt mines, or forced labourers in Nazi camps – they all had men standing over them with whips or guns. But there wasn't anybody forcing us to drag ourselves through the mud with a thirty-kilo pack on our backs, day after day, on two hundred calories a day. We had only ourselves to blame for the thirst, the oedema, the bloody diarrhoea, the unremitting misery. Like friars with their rosaries, we had chosen to carry all the jingling bits and pieces of our profession: cartridge pouches, wallets, gourds, mugs, knives, machetes, sometimes revolvers. In addition, we also carried our houses on our backs – thirty kilos of domestic necessities, not counting the daily distribution of prizes: transistor radio for José-Luis, transmitter for Hugo, gun tripod for Enrique, etc. I certainly couldn't complain as to weight: all I had to carry was the big cooking pot – a clanking piece of iron-mongery awkwardly fastened to my rucksack: but one had

to crawl, sometimes, to keep clear of low branches, or the clangour would have aroused every animal for miles around – military animals included. This venerable and troublesome object was supposed to ensure us a ladleful of rice each in the evenings; but since we had no water to cook the rice, we made do with a piece of lump sugar, along with our daily sardine. After which we would flop into our hammocks and fall asleep just as we were, our shirts clammy with cooled-down sweat.

But you must remember that in the long run it is just as dangerous not to stop. Continual marching is unbelievably depressing. Left, right, left, right. You don't look to the side, or even ahead; your eyes remain fixed on the ground. You could pass within a couple of yards of someone without seeing him, unless he moved or made a noise. It's all too easy to find yourself in the middle of an ambush. Fatigue induces a dangerous absence of mind when all you are aware of is your legs and the soles of your feet and your ankles, the pounding of the blood where the pack on your back rubs against your neck. In the end you are marching with your eyes shut.

At the end of this particular march came the hardest part of all: picking up a load of heavy arms hidden in a river-bed near a deserted beach. A cold mist hung over the area, where the dried-up river-bed fanned out into a complicated delta of white shingle. The mist hid each man from the next as we went along in Indian file. We had left our packs in the forest, bringing just our guns and empty sacks. Our clothes were damp and cold, and stuck to our skins. We could hear dogs barking, so there must have been houses of some kind near by, but we had been walking in the open without seeing one for three hours, following the bend of the stream, twisting our ankles among the rocks – each curve of the river appearing to take us a bit further away from the sea. At last we reached the concrete bridge over the river. The main road running

alongside the shore was deserted, but on the other side of the bridge, on a strip of flat ground a bit below us, a line of black cars was parked: two hearses with curtained windows, followed by four very smart hired cars.

'Our friends can't be far off,' said Andrés. It was a method we had used ourselves before now. The police seldom disturb a funeral procession.

'They'll be feeling a lot more lively than we are – it's only three hours' drive from the city. Civilization does have its advantages!' I said, with a forced laugh.

We found the undertaker's men near the beach, hidden from view behind a waist-high forest of reeds. They sat in their black suits, joking and laughing, swigging cans of beer. Very smart they were, with peaked caps and silver buttons. When they first saw us they were totally non-plussed; then they began to explain that they had no idea why they were there: they were on a job, re-loading some sort of shipment, they had no idea what.

'We know all about it,' Andrés told them. And he made them hand over their revolvers (45s, no less, with three magazines each, enough to fill their empty coffin) and left them where they were with one of our comrades on guard.

Victor then led us to the hiding-place, following the shore line till he came to a clump of three mango-trees. And there we found them – a dozen men, all dressed in black (though they'd taken off their jackets and rolled up their sleeves) busily digging up the cases half-buried under a heap of leaves and branches. We recognized each other at once. And with all the memories we shared, we didn't think of the split between us at first: we'd all done our training together on the Island before going our different ways to the *sierra* or the city, and we were like old friends at a school reunion. We felt one another, and sniffed one another, and could hardly stop laughing. It was just so surprising. We tend to recognize one another more by smell than by ideology, you know. Only one man held

aloof; he stood some way off and said nothing. It was Joaquim. Andrés recognized him at once, of course, but the rest of us didn't know him. They looked at each other for a while before they spoke: Andrés was quite relaxed, and Joaquim was a bit embarrassed but not completely abashed. After all he *might* have been convinced that we weren't coming for the stuff, though it was a bit soon for that – Oh, yes, I was forgetting. There was a girl with Joaquim. I think he called her Celia. Not bad-looking, in a black dress – a very pretty widow, certainly not ravaged by grief. She didn't join in the general fraternization either, but she didn't look as concerned as Joaquim did.

Andrés whispered to me to go over and count the cases and check everything. There were thirty-two cases of different sizes. The heaviest – weighing about as much as three rucksacks I should think – must have been the parts for the mortars. Their coffins would never have taken it all. When I came back, everyone was looking miserable. They were sitting silent in two separate groups, and Andrés and Joaquim and the girl had gone off to talk a hundred yards away in an old fisherman's hut on the beach. The rest of us sat staring at each other like a lot of china dogs. In about half an hour they came back. Andrés was still smiling, and he said to the city group: 'Sorry, boys, but you've had a journey for nothing. Your coffins will be going back empty. For the moment we'll just get the guns across the road where they'll be safe in the forest. After that we'll take charge of them.'

They looked at Joaquim, but he still said nothing, though his fists were clenched and he was obviously furious. But he had no choice: there were over forty of us, with FALs and automatic weapons, and less than half as many of them, with only revolvers. He had certainly brought a hard core of dependable militants though – not *one* of them came over to our side. Joaquim then said to them: 'No one's taking the guns anywhere tonight.'

They'll stay here for now. The Party and the Front will be sharing them.'

'But meanwhile', Andrés said quickly, 'they can't stay here in the open. You must help us shift them.'

'Go ahead,' said Joaquim, shrugging his shoulders. 'It won't be for long.' It was hard to know what he meant by that – maybe he only said it to save face. It can't have been much fun for him to see his men used as hostages like that, acting as sherpas under Andrés's orders. But I don't think he gave way just because he was afraid, just because we were too strong for him. That isn't Joaquim's style. And Andrés had been scrupulously correct: he didn't humiliate the famous Joaquim by telling us who this man was. We only found that out later. No, I think it was just that time was precious, and there was certainly no point in our shooting one another.

Moving the stuff took us the whole night. We strung ourselves out in a chain, two by two, and passed it along. Only two or three lorries passed along the road all night. Around four, the line of hills opposite us began getting pink. We had got all the stuff into the forest by then (and Andrés himself hid the cases, so that only we should know precisely where they were), and from there on we were on home ground and didn't need the others any more. So we let them go, with our warmest thanks, and they got back into their splendid cars in stony silence.

'Sorry about your suits,' Omar called after them, 'you must send us the cleaner's bill!'

Joaquim, the girl and two other men were already in their limousine, with a driver in a peaked cap. They talked for a while in low voices, and then we saw the procession split. Four cars turned round and set off back towards the city. Joaquim's and another one carried on in the opposite direction, towards Puerto Catamarca. It was a relief to see the funeral cortege depart. Only then did we start laughing, thinking how clever we'd been, and how

red their faces were. If we'd had a bottle of rum we'd have opened it to celebrate.

It was getting light, and we had to get a move on to cut through the forest and re-join the river further upstream. Andrés decided not to go back the way we had come, but take a route higher up and come down to the clearing where we had left our packs. In order to leave no tracks, we had to walk either in the water or on the rocks, so we slithered and jumped from rock to rock with the cases on our backs, like dockers on a tightrope. The ravine got narrower and narrower, and the water sometimes came up to our waists. By nightfall we had at last reached the final ford, the one we must cross to get back: beyond it there was a sheer impassable wall. Our packs were on the other side, in the cave where Andrés intended to leave the cases of guns hidden until several columns of us could come back and divide them among all the detachments of the Front. We were half-dead with hunger and fatigue, but at last we felt safe. The river must have been about forty yards wide at that point, but between the glinting of the sun on the surface and the muddiness of the water, one couldn't tell how deep. We got ourselves down onto the little patch of black gravel beach, and the noise of the river's swirling was drowned by the macaws and toucans and parrots, the almost human crying of the sloths in the trees, the stridulation of the crickets and the croaking of the bullfrogs – the age-old noises of the jungle. I remembered then how Che used to say that when a guerrilla is so tired he can hardly put one foot in front of the other, he always still has a tiny hidden reserve of energy – and I wondered where the hell my reserve could be hidden: I couldn't for the life of me see how I could go another step, and I think we'd all reached the same point. Even Andrés. We must have stayed where we were for twenty minutes – lying on the ground, too exhausted to see or hear anything. Or at least to notice anything.

Then an advance guard went ahead to explore the far bank, crossing over without mishap, to make a routine inspection. (Though this forest was so thick and tangled that one wondered what they could possibly inspect, or how, without simply getting swallowed up by it.) Tulio gave the all clear. Everything was fine. Then it was our turn. Omar went into the water first, his unloaded gun held above his head. Then the rest followed, each with a case on his back, three yards apart. Gabo went in the middle with his Johnson automatic rifle. I was one of those who stayed behind on the bank with Andrés, to cover them. Suddenly Omar went down, his hands in the air, just as he reached the far side; then with a clatter we saw the advance guard fall like dominoes, one on top of another (they hadn't kept their distances properly). It took us five seconds to realize what was happening – an eternity if you think that an FAL can empty a magazine of twenty bullets in three. Knocking off this line of unarmed men in the river was like target-shooting at a fair. Except that the gunman was invisible. Gabo just had time to load and fire one round blindly before he went down. Some of those who were only wounded tried to hide in the water, and let the current carry them away. But the water wasn't deep enough, and they were fired on from the far bank, from downstream. Others simply sank and drowned where they were. I shall never forget the sight of Jaime: he had a case of grenades in his arms, holding it protectively like a child: he turned round and tried to come back towards us, but they got him in the back. We began shooting, taking cover behind rocks, but it was too late. And *we* had no targets to shoot at – all we could do was keep firing at the opposite bank in the hope of dislodging them.

Finally, one of them shouted across on a loud-hailer: 'We've got you surrounded. If you give yourselves up your lives will be spared. We are the Colorado Battalion.' Andrés replied with a burst of fire. The battalion could

easily be a myth. After all, it only takes three men to set up an ambush: you have to combine slow regular firing (and even an old Springfield will do for that) with short bursts of automatic fire. That was a technique Fidel devised. We'd used it dozens of times, even against heavy vehicles, and it always worked. Especially with tracers to direct your fire. When someone asked Che how many men you need to start a war, he said, 'Three. But they must have *one* automatic weapon.' We heard the megaphone again: 'You're frightened, aren't you? Come out, you bastards, and put your hands up!' We knew it was the classic ruse, to get us to answer and show them where we were. But it was hard to let it pass, all the same; all we could do was clench our teeth and swear under our breath. There were six of us left: Andrés, Julio, Nato, William, Víctor and myself. We wondered why they didn't lob their grenades into the middle of us – it was the ideal distance. But as we got out and crawled away into the undergrowth, we understood: their own men were in ambush, hidden behind us. Nato stayed behind by himself to cover us, with the Johnson set up, to prevent their crossing while we took up our positions. The men behind were only waiting for us to retreat, and they'd have picked us off like flies. Suddenly, however, one of them let off his gun accidentally, and we could see where they were, spread out in an arc, fifty yards or so from the bank. I should think, in that gloom, they were even more frightened than we were. They were badly placed, and didn't manage to synchronize their fire. Our one chance would be to get through while it was still dark. We felt our way along their firing line to find its weakest spot, reducing our own fire to the minimum. Their response was more than generous – to every bullet of ours they returned two or three volleys: clearly they were novices. After half an hour of this, about a third of them seemed to have used up their ammunition, and of course they dared not move to go and get more.

Once we had found a gap in their line (they were about thirty yards apart, straight opposite us) Victor went to get Nato so that we could move together. Somehow or other we got across.

They got William in the head. We dragged him along, Julio taking his pack and gun. We plunged on into the forest, cutting away the undergrowth, and at last found one of our own paths. We had shaken them off. We were finally safe. But William was dying: a bullet had ripped off his scalp, and half of it hung down to one side; his face was covered in blood, and his breath came in a continuous rattle. There was nothing we could say to him. He gazed at us with a look of anxiety, as though reproaching us for something. Andrés, who always carried serum in his pack, set up a transfusion, and told him cheerfully that it was only a slight wound – he'd be perfectly okay after a couple of weeks' rest at the central camp. But William, still with that terrible rattling breath, shook his head in denial. I couldn't look him in the face; I couldn't even stay beside him any more. That last look of his was ghastly. But I still feel ashamed of myself: I should have held him in my arms, instead of pretending everything was going to be all right. Instead of looking away. As Che said, it is hard to steel yourself to suffering without becoming heartless. It was William who met me when I first got to the camp (when you'd sent me up there to persuade Andrés to be patient). And now he was going, my mate, who taught me everything – from making a slip-knot for my hammock to dividing a lump of sugar into ten. I had only a few seconds to let him know what I felt – and then it was too late. Andrés's serum didn't help. William died in that minute, when my back was turned. Embarrassment is a terrible thing: stops you living, and stops you helping your friend when he's dying. Andrés took his watch, to give back to his family some day, and his personal papers – two or three letters from his wife. We divided his other

stuff up among us: hammock, blanket, change of clothes in a plastic bag. We couldn't leave him there, to the ants and the animals. Andrés decided that we'd bury him, which meant digging the hole with our hands. It had to be fairly deep; if it weren't at least a couple of feet down the body would be dug up again by some carnivore. It was terribly hard work. We buried him with his boots on – none of us had the heart to take them off, though we normally do in such cases.

An hour later, Victor switched on the transistor. By some miracle we still had it and it still worked. We got the midnight news, and heard that the others had been killed on the road, a few kilometres from where we had left them. They'd tried to arrest them, but they'd defended themselves to the last with their wretched revolvers. They hadn't even had time to get out of the cars.

What a coup! They must have known precisely where the guns were brought ashore. They must have known we would split into two, and they were able to get us separately just when our fire-power was at its lowest. What was odd was that they announced with great fanfare that they had captured a large consignment of foreign arms (from Cuba, naturally!) whereas most of the arms were now at the bottom of the river. But that's not the point, I suppose: they have to have Cuban arms, for propaganda purposes. It seems that the only thing they weren't expecting was for Joaquim and his friend to go off in the other direction: all their road blocks were on the one side, going back towards the city.

All in all, quite a memorable day. Do you know what Andrés said, when we had heard the news? 'I spoke too soon,' he said. 'Their coffins were empty when they left all right, but they'll be full when they get home after all. I was wrong.' That's all he did say. He didn't utter another word for two days – and then he told me to come down to the city somehow, and get in touch with you.

★★★★★

So here was Diego back in the city. He had been back for thirty-six hours, but he still had that semi-mystical look people have when they come down from the *sierra*, the cavernous eyes, the hollow cheeks, and the great white patches where the beard has only just been shaved off. And the words, pouring out, battering the listener; the passionate longing to shake everyone out of their apathy.

‘And do you know what became of Joaquim and the girl?’

‘They must be in Colombia by now. But it won’t be long before they’re back. They were bloody lucky, those two.’

‘Yes, that *was* a bit of luck.’

‘Luck? I don’t see what difference it makes to us. Joaquim and his girl are nothing to do with us.’

‘I wasn’t thinking so much of us, as of myself. It was a bit of luck for me.’

‘Oh, Frank, for God’s sake. That’s hardly the point!’

‘I know. I’m sorry. I always seem to be missing the point –’

★★★★★

Midday. The man crossed the road and came up to Frank just as he was coming out of the front door.

Frank stopped, and mechanically his hand went to his belt; he looked around him, uncertain what to do.

‘It’s from the director,’ the man mumbled in bad French, and handed him an envelope.

‘What director?’ asked Frank. But the man had already walked on and was lost among the traffic. Then, suddenly, he remembered where he had seen that face before: it was the pale, bespectacled clerk who opened the door to him at France-Presse, and showed him into Carlet’s office.

The letter was typed, and dated that same day.

1 February, 10 a.m.

Dear friend,

There's nowhere I can meet you, and I don't want to bother you at home, so I thought I'd better send you this sealed note (though the messenger is absolutely trustworthy). I'm not trying to make trouble – this is really urgent. Two bits of information you may find useful:

1. Two Seguridad men have just been to see me – friendly, but persistent. A naval officer came with them. They were particularly anxious to know what I could tell them about you. The upshot seems to be that you had better leave the country at once. The DIFA and the Ministry of the Interior have been looking for you for the past 24 hours – *not* just for a chat. Keep out of sight as far as you can, and don't stay at your place. If I can find out your address, then other people can too. I need hardly point out that the airport isn't a good idea, unless you're a lot cleverer than I think. (And remember: you haven't seen me for six months.)

2. Rossi (a mutual 'friend' I believe) isn't, or at least isn't *only* 'Count Rossi'. He's also Carlo Bordendini, a war criminal, wanted both by the Italian police and the Chinese. He was commander of the San Marco Battalion of the Italian navy in Shanghai during World War Two. He supported the Mussolini 'Social Republic of Salò' in 1943, and when the Italian diplomatic staff there placed themselves under the Badoglio government, he handed them over to the Japanese. Ten Italian diplomats died in the Manchurian iron mines. The consul, having ordered an Italian liner in the port to be scuttled on orders from Rome, was captured by Bordendini personally, and handed over to the Japanese army, who tortured and killed him. Bordendini, alias Rossi, was identified several years ago, but he's managed to buy protection from the governments of various countries by his 'outstanding' services. They can get him to do almost anything, because his record is so terrible: but the result is that now no one can touch him. I thought you and your friends knew all this, but I seem to have overestimated your caution (or underestimated your inexperience).

I was in Buchenwald for a year. I've always been a Gaullist, and I still am. The OAS put a booby-trap in my son's car, in

mistake for mine: death was instantaneous. The Empire of the North doesn't accord with my ideas of liberty and national independence – any more, I need hardly say, than the Empire of the East. That's why I'm telling you this (apart from our personal friendship).

For both our sakes this must be our final contact. There's nothing more I can do for you, and anyway I wouldn't. The fact that we have the same enemies doesn't mean that we have the same ideas.

I needn't remind you to destroy this at once.

Best of luck,

C.

Frank turned round and went straight back into the flat, red-faced, crumpling the piece of paper in his fist. He had thought he was playing Carlet along, and all the time it had really been the other way round. Carlet had known where he lived. He had known all about his dealings with Rossi. But *how*? Where had he got his information? It was quite a useful lesson in humility: always and everywhere one underestimates people. The biter bit. Only in this case he had taken a friend for an enemy – and Rossi for a swindler instead of a murderer.

As he dropped the charred fragments of the letter, he realized that he had burnt his fingers. It had not even hurt.

★★★★★

A purple coolness descended on the city. The first lights spread over the hillsides like a flight of rainbow-gnats. The kebab-sellers, at their painted wooden barrows by the kerbside, were hanging up their acetylene lamps and stirring the embers in their braziers: rich smells of bacon-fat, red peppers, grilling meat. Kids sat on their front steps playing jacks. Other kids played in the gutter, setting fire to heaps of refuse. An elderly street photographer emerged

from under his black cloth and wearily folded up his tripod. Petrol fumes rose from the avenue below, where the cars crawled along, four abreast, bumper to bumper. Among the acacias, scorched and brown from the smoke of a million exhausts, the first fireflies flickered. Frank was early: to kill time he bought himself a small kebab of mutton.

It was that time of evening when the day suddenly pauses and flags, an interval of suspense between the harassed frenzy of the day and the more voluptuous frenzy of the night. A vaguely melancholy softness permeated the shadows and silences. The stagnant heat of the afternoon slowly evaporated and once again one began to think of wine, women and song. The line of mountaintops became tinged with pink. Gangs of half-wild children swarmed down from the *ranchos* into the wealthy part of town, some with shoe-shine kits, others, empty-handed and sharp-eyed, ready to slip in among the tables of the cafés and scoop up the sugar-lumps, playing tag with the waiters who chased them back out onto the pavement, swatting them with napkins like so many flies. Every evening at twilight, the entire city seemed to weigh anchor, like some mammoth steamer with thousands of portholes, preparing for a night that would never end, a trip to some improbable Eldorado. 'The moment for love,' thought Frank, 'it won't last.' And he went on walking aimlessly among the aimlessly wandering crowds of the *barrios*.

Political workers are never punctual, but those who run the military sector always are. Frank, killing time as he paced up and down under the arcades in the Avenida Castro, worked out a bet with himself: if Milo is on time, then Lucas is still in command of his local detachment of the Front; if he's late, then he has elected to go back to being the ordinary cadre he was when this war began. But he had barely formulated it when, at three minutes to eight, he caught sight of a boy in a red T-shirt playing with

a cup-and-ball, under the arcades. Milo saw him coming, and started to walk away, still concentrating on the up and down of his ball, its noise echoing under the arcade. Frank kept in step with him, twenty yards or so behind. Strips of green and red bunting hung above the arcades, along balconies, and across the road, left over from yesterday's election. 'Vote Green – Vote Progress': or here and there: 'Fight the Rot – Protect Your Family – If You Don't Like Your Country, Leave It.' Milo went on up the avenue at a leisurely pace, in the direction of the *ranchos* high up on the hillside. Perched up there in the distance one could see the steep structures of the workers' estates, twenty storeys of sleeping-quarters lined up behind one another like dominoes. Most of their windows had lost both glass and shutters, and the concrete façades were enlivened by multi-coloured wrapping paper and cardboard boxes. These days the National Guard were up there, signalling to one another from lookout posts on the roofs, but life was still as unsavoury as ever. Even at night shooting could be heard.

'Late Night Special – Read All About It. . .' Like a flock of doves suddenly released or a bevy of white-cornetted nuns, the paper boys came running out of the *Mundo* building, with piles of newspapers flapping on their heads. They swarmed into the road, weaving in and out among the cars, bumping into the pedestrians. One was caught by the wing of a lorry and knocked over, just as he came level with Frank, and his entire pile went down with him like a pack of cards. He got up unsteadily, but a sudden gust of wind scattered his papers to right and left; passers-by grabbed them as they flew through the air, and the boy ran from side to side, trying to recover as many as he could. One blew against Frank's legs, and he read the huge letters that covered most of the front page: CUBAN ARMS CAPTURED – FOREIGN INTERVENTION – MAJOR DEBACLE FOR EXTREMISTS. He flung the paper away and

hurried to catch up with Milo, by now almost out of sight.

Five minutes later, they turned into a side street. A lookout was posted there, and at a sign from Milo, he fell into step with Frank, also keeping his distance. Milo went into one of the identical-looking yellowish roughcast houses, emerging moments later and signalling to Frank to enter.

Lucas was in the front sitting-room. His handshake was somewhat limp, and he seemed out of sorts. His boxer's face, with its puffy brows, high coppery cheekbones and flat nose, looked glummer than usual. A boy of fifteen stood beside him, and looked at Frank with some curiosity.

'This is Tonio, who lives here.'

A shrill voice from the kitchen called, 'Tonio, come here! Leave the grown-ups in peace.'

Tonio went reluctantly, dragging his feet.

'He'd join our youth group like a shot,' whispered Lucas. 'He'd do anything for us. That night you were with us – they shot his brother Luben, and he was only a year older.'

A middle-aged woman in black, with great dark circles round her eyes, came in silently with a tray and set two steaming cups of coffee in front of them. She had the look of one whose thoughts are far away. Frank rose to his feet politely and bowed. But the woman ignored him, turning her back. Her wordless severity was answer enough. She stood and waited while they finished their coffee, her deference worse than abuse; she wore her mourning like an accusation. Without looking at her, Lucas muttered, 'You should let Tonio do as he wants –'

'Ivan did what he wanted. So did Luben. They both did what they wanted, and look what happened to them.'

'It'll be different soon, Margarita. The army will be leaving. Being stationed here is too uncomfortable for them.'

'They've been going to leave "soon" for a long time now. And while they're around our kids might just as well be

dogs. They don't even put a sheet over them when they're lying dead in the street. They tell a neighbour to let you know, and they tell you to come to the morgue, and all the bodies are in a heap on the floor, and they make you sign a paper. They don't care.' She seemed on the point of exploding, her voice strident and angry, her hands clutching her head. 'No one's going to take Tonio away from me! I've had as much of your Revolution as I can take.'

'Please leave us,' said Lucas in a sharp voice. She picked up the cups and left them alone together, but they could hear her moaning to herself in the kitchen.

Lucas cleared his throat and looked at Frank: 'She's right. We pushed it too far. The military only attack when we attack them – that's true in the city as well as in the *sierra*. We broke the rules and we paid for it.'

'We paid for it.' That was all he said. But Frank knew that the Front groups in Lucas's sector had lost two-thirds of their members, arrested, wounded or 'missing'. Of the men involved that night, he could count the survivors on the fingers of one hand. But whether from pride or shame, Lucas never actually blamed Frank for the number he had lost. The past was past; the dead do not live long.

'If you support the fractionalists, what the hell are you doing here? You ought to be up in the *sierra* with them.'

'Give me time,' Frank grumbled. 'It's not a question of what people you're with: it's the political line that counts. . . . Anyway, no one is indispensable,' he added, glad to have thought of a respectable excuse.

'No, it's a question of logic,' responded Lucas, in the same low voice. 'If you make a choice you must follow it through.'

'And your choice is to stay with the present bureau? Which means kicking out Andrés, making a truce, disarming the masses –'

'What masses? You go round the cells and sections here,

and you'll find the militants all side with Badilla and the bureau. A few intellectuals and students may want to stick it out, but they hardly matter.'

'Okay. You win. But this isn't the moment to discuss differences,' said Frank, realizing at last how wrong he had been. 'We've got more important things to do. Rossi didn't give a damn about our disputes, and he was absolutely right.'

Lucas nodded, relieved. Both of them seemed simultaneously to feel that they must get back to practical details, to what was actually happening now, if they were to save what really mattered. That was Lucas's inclination anyway, and Frank was grateful to him. What mattered between them was the tacit complicity of working against a common enemy – theirs would be a real underground friendship if there could be such a thing as friendship among the underground. Each knew that he could (and indeed must) help the other, without it being necessary to decide which was in the right. Friendship is being able to believe without seeing. Frank found such dogged and implicit confidence reassuring. And moving. He longed to show what he felt – with a word, or a gesture, or a smile. But it was impossible: for political reasons their relationship must be impersonal.

Lucas's headquarters had a dreary familiarity. Two spirals of blue-grey smoke rose from the ashtray towards the ceiling, where an unshaded bulb hung, giving out a drab yellow light. The tiled floor gleamed like a ballroom. For Frank it was like being back at his grandparents' home near Basle. The cheap Sunday-best furniture of the poor. A glass-fronted sideboard with floral-patterned china carefully arranged; armchairs covered in green repp with fringes; a low table with a couple of china ladies in flounces and a vase of artificial tulips. An ornate bowl with a crocheted doily under it. Above Lucas's head, in a varnished frame, some greenish naiads gambolled among

stone pillars and cypresses with a bright red waterfall and some vaguely Greek ruins in the background: mythological kitsch. Alongside that, a petrol-blue Madonna held a fine Heinz baby with a mauve halo. Frank found these pictures endlessly depressing: they could have come straight out of the postmaster's chalet in any Swiss village. It seemed that, in America, only the rich could actually live in America, in the gardens of America with their hibiscus and orchids: the poor lived in the houses of Europe, shabby, pre-war Europe – the Europe of Dubo, Dubon, Dubonnet, Dutch dolls from Amsterdam and antimacassars. Joaquim was quite right, he thought: this continent is still only the dumping ground for our junk.

He pulled himself out of his reverie. 'Have you got me that information? They seem to be in a bit of a hurry.'

No one had in fact asked for any information, but in the written message he had sent Lucas a week earlier, Frank had presented his request as coming from the military leadership. Such a request from an individual would have seemed odd. And in any case, given the way people were generally appointing themselves to grades and functions, why shouldn't he?

'I don't know what you've got against this fellow. He looks all right to me. You don't want to bring the whole Italian colony down on top of you.'

'I know no more than I've told you.' He almost believed it himself.

'Well, his home is guarded – that seems to be a fairly new development. There's a patrol car driving round regularly all night. And the bird is just about ready to fly. He's shutting up shop. The "Bolívar Yachting Company" is in process of liquidation, but he still goes to the office in the Avenida Lincoln every morning. Leaves home between eight and eight-thirty, usually in a Mercedes – white coupé – this year's model. Want the number?'

'Doesn't matter, thanks.'

'Well, he has two other cars he sometimes uses: a Mustang and a Ford Capri. But that's mostly in the evenings.'

'What route does he take?'

'There's only one way he can go. To get down from there to the Avenida Lincoln, you have to take the main road, Calle Esperanza and Calle Paraíso. He doesn't drive himself – he's got a chauffeur called Giani, a real prize-fighter type – must be in the DIFA: he seems to be the one who gives the orders to the police on duty outside the house and in the neighbourhood. He stays in his office till one. After that, it varies. He uses different restaurants, and different cars; sometimes comes back to his office in the afternoon, sometimes not. Roughly every other evening, he goes to the Italian Association Sports Club at seven, to play squash. Then out for dinner and drinks – various different girl-friends. But not so often any more. He has no regular time for getting home, anyway.' The chauffeur isn't there all the time, of course; but when he's off, another DIFA man takes over. We haven't been able to identify him. He tends to appear in the evenings. Looks like an officer off duty.'

'Congratulations, Lucas. That tallies perfectly with the information we've got,' said Frank – who had no information at all.

'All that changing of cars would make it hard to plant a bomb, of course.'

'Oh yes, that's out of the question – at least as far as I can see,' Frank added hastily. 'Of course it isn't up to me to decide.' Though he enjoyed the childish pleasure of making up explosives, he thought it beneath him to use them against human targets – leave that to the other side. 'I'm not sure,' he went on, 'but I have a feeling they want to deal with this one by shooting.'

'Well, that's their business, isn't it? Makes no difference to me.'

'Nor me – but, off-hand, what would you think would be the best way to go about it?'

'Get him in his car, in the street. It'll take at least five men to do the job.'

'Mm – I think that's about the number they have in mind.'

'And three cars, as usual.'

'Of course.'

'One with two or three comrades in for the operation. Another near by to cover them and the third in the rear for security, to block the way, just in case. One man is enough in the third, as long as he knows what he's doing. By the way, have you all the cars you need?'

So Frank's carefully worded speeches had pulled no wool over his eyes.

'To tell you the truth, Lucas, we've only got two. We really need something dependable for the operation itself. You being a mechanic, we wondered if you could help us out. Expropriate something for us, and check that it's okay. Jaguar or Mercedes, or something like that. The heavier the better for this sort of job, you know.'

'When do you want it?'

'Well, we still have to work out some of the timing, and we've got to have somewhere secure to hide out afterwards – you can't just improvise a thing like this.'

'I'll have to have three days.'

'Why's that?'

'Because three days is how long they list stolen cars for. After that they're filed. Do you want the colour changed?'

'There's no point.'

'Milo and his friends will do the job for you. Cars are what they like fixing best.'

'By the way – you remember those grenades that night? I gave you back one: have you still got it?'

'Oh yes, I've got it, safely tucked away. As things are now, it's something of a nuisance.'

'Well, it might be useful to us for the covering car, if we need to delay pursuit. If you're sure you don't really need it.'

'I hope never to need one again. And I certainly don't want it as a souvenir. If it helps you, you're welcome. . . Tonio, bring me the fruit basket, will you?'

A door slammed, and Margarita's voice was heard: 'You stay right here, Tonio. You're not to go into the living-room while that damn *gringo*'s there.'

Lucas made a helpless gesture, but Frank reassured him: 'I see her point. The *gringo* has had just about enough too.'

So now he was the enemy. Tongues must have been wagging since the Lidice operation: he was the *gringo*, Lucas's friend who had ordered the operation, and then got away himself by daybreak, before the house-to-house searches and the reprisals. But of course there was no getting away for them – they lived there.

'I don't need to spell it out for you. You can see the state people are in, even our own people, people we can count on. Margarita's husband is in the Party: he's a metal-worker somewhere on the edge of town. When I told him I needed to use his house this evening to meet someone, he couldn't refuse, but he'd rather not be here. . . Everyone's had enough.'

'Terrorism is pointless – I agree with you there. The only thing that's worth-while now is what's happening in the *sierra*. That's the beginning of the Long March. And, Lucas, I really had no choice, but I'm sorry I had to come here. I blame myself for the worry I've caused the lady. It's very kind of her to have let us use her house. . . Oh, by the way, can I give you this letter?'

'For me?'

'No, for Joaquim's assistant –'

'You mean the girl with Tomas Badilla, the fellow who's just escaped? But how am I to get it to her? You know quite well I've got no contacts at the top.'

'Via the federal bureau – surely you can do that? He's one of your Party leaders, isn't he? After all, he'll have to show his face when he's standing for senator! When he wants to get your votes in Lidice, he'll come round canvassing –'

'I don't think that's funny, Frank. I'd rather you took charge of your own letter.'

'Well, for one thing, remember I'm not a Party member; for another, you want to cut down contacts as much as you can before an operation like this one –'

'And for another, you want to get rid of it.'

'It's no use trying to hide anything from you, is it? Look, if you see them, either of them, him or her, tell them I apologize for having taken so long to explain myself. I've never had any sense of timing. I realize the stupidest things too late. And give them my love, too. I really am fond of them, in spite of everything.'

'What do you mean – "in spite of everything"? *Everyone* respects Badilla, even the middle class!'

'Okay – forget the love. Just present my respects. And to the *señora* too.'

'All the best, Frank. You go out first – one of our comrades is covering you'.

★★★★★

Lucas plunged in headlong, and he is now retreating headlong. Armando is racked by doubts, perhaps even to the point of abandoning the Party. Of course, for a man to desert the ranks of his Party is not necessarily a condemnation of the man, still less of the Party; it proves only that there has been a failure of understanding between them. Armando looked to the international communist movement to give him a Vision of the World, to give a Meaning to his Life. Alas, he was living in the past: in our age great ideas must be spelt without capital letters.

Which is a pity.

To be a revolutionary today does not mean to make the Revolution an absolute. But nor can you be a revolutionary without having, some day or other, to face the lions in the arena, or kill a few gladiators. Agnostics have never made outstanding martyrs. Or good gladiators. Any communist today who has no doubts at all about communism is a dangerous lunatic. Yet no one with doubts will ever succeed in storming a nest of machine-guns. Anyone who gives his total, unquestioning, unmeasured loyalty needs putting in a straitjacket. Yet if he questions and measures, his loyalty will be about as dependable as a sponge.

One is simply not prepared to die, or to kill, for ideas that do not merit capitalization. Every sacrifice needs to have an absolute value. Yet the age of absolutes no longer exists, whereas that of sacrifices and holocausts is back in full force.

Would that we could ask Lenin the answer to his own question: What is to be done?

What we must do -- indeed, cannot *not* do -- is breed a new race of militants: zealous unbelievers. A mystical body with a sceptical head. Rational, and therefore divided in their opinions, but wholehearted in their action, and therefore raving mad. Agnostic extremists. In our age the challenge is to be devout without believing. If we fail to respond, then the age will simply roll over us.

Can one watch one's shadow while one is running? Can one be both behind the camera and inside the skin of the sitter? Carry out an order while questioning whether it is justified? Obey while assessing the person in command? Can we, in this fragmented age, hope to succeed in what the Jesuits attempted in vain in the days of Loyola: being intelligent soldiers? In their world there was order and clarity, one pope and one king, yet they came to grief none the less. Here are we, groping our way around amid

the shreds of this crazy darkness, this poor age with no centre, no north, south, east, or west, no saintly father general. And yet. And yet. Surely the reason I came here to fight in the first place was to work for a world in which it will be possible to remain faithful to the last without having to close the eyes of one's reason. To obey a leader chosen simply because he has proved himself slightly less fallible, slightly more dependable, than the average man. Is it possible to have an ideal and not fall into idolatry? A myth without any mystification? I doubt it. Doubt again, and always: will we ever be free of it?

I doubt it, because we are condemned. We are late-comers in a world that is too old, and the dice were loaded against us before we were born. The game is lost in advance. Whether we are atheists or believers, our heredity makes us agnostics, people obliged, whether they want to or not, to be their own masters. People who can therefore never belong unconditionally to any clan – tribe, army or party. Sooner or later, above the guns and shouts of command, we hear an imperious little voice that forces us to turn our attention *inwards*. Perhaps it is simply Western individualism. I admit that the taint is a strong one, but that is how we are made. No one can efface from his soul three thousand years of history, and ours has moved steadily towards a society that is less monolithic, and individuals who are more individual.

Oh, for the days when trails were blazed and paths marked out! I am horribly tempted to say that none of it has anything to do with me any more: sufficient unto each of us is the evil thereof, every man for himself and Marx for all. And when the Day of Judgment comes, when the world-wide republic of soviets spreads its wings like a great white dove over land and sea, He will know whom to set at His right hand, and to hell with the rest. Whatever happens, I shall not be there to see it. But I do regret the days of the great sacrifices, when hearts burning

with hope were offered to the high priest on the altars of the Future: to Moloch, Quetzalcoatl, Christ, Mahomet or the Tide of History. Those blessed days when there was Something, up above, that would receive human souls as an offering, an investment or a pledge, and ensure that news of them came down to the ears of posterity.

Ours is the age of suicides, of ambiguous hope, of dubious actions. So, Comrade Frank, you must get a move on. The New World lies before you. No need to worry though – no harm can come to you. However hard you run, you're too unsteady on your feet ever to catch up.

★★★★★

Eight forty-four: the hands were moving, so he wasn't dreaming after all. He was connected to reality by those two tiny red pointers at the right of the dashboard. He no longer heard the engine, which had been idling quietly for a quarter of an hour – ever since he was born, since the night of time – it made no more noise than the clock ticking. But the light showing up the little red arrow pointing to N (for Neutral) reminded him that all he had to do was put his foot down, and the car would hurtle forward. It had been a mistake to suggest such a thing as a Mercedes to Lucas: he had done his job far too well. Frank found himself with a 280 SE, electronic fuel-injection, six-cylinder, double-carburettor giant with a speedometer that promised 240 kilometres an hour: a small tank, with only himself as captain, pilot and gunner. He was hardly up to managing such a monster. But he was glad that he was on his own. In weather like this, a lookout on foot would attract attention, and would see no better than he could.

Whose attention, though? Visibility was poor – a disadvantage that worked both ways. And the street was deserted. Which was lucky for him, since what he wanted

was to be invisible. He shrank down on his seat, making himself as small as he could, disappearing below the level of the head-rest. What if Lucas saw him? It was hardly likely. But in fact, if Lucas were to pass right alongside he wouldn't be able to see inside the car for the rain driving against the windows. To pass the time, Frank entertained himself by following the patterns it made, like a great river with tributaries and deltas flowing all over the windscreen. He was well concealed.

Eight forty-six. Still nothing. He sat stiff, eyes blinking, pins and needles in his legs. A tongue-twister floated into his head: *Pou qui peut poum n'est plus pou*. He couldn't think where it came from. At first he found it rather comforting to have it go round and round in his mind, but after a while it stopped making sense, and became just a series of meaningless sounds: *poukipeupoumnaiplupou*. So he tried *Chasseur sachant chasser l'archiduchesse*, for a change. God, how he hated waiting. Listening to himself counting sheep. The man was late. Of course. But late for what? They had made no appointment. Apologies from the Meteorological Office. Great sheets of rain thundered monotonously down, almost completely hiding the city below from view. Not just a downpour: a deluge, abundant, outsize. The occasional car that passed was going at a snail's pace, cleaving the rain like a motor-boat, spraying mud on either side. He could no longer hear it rattling on the coachwork – was he in a boat or a gun-turret? A submarine or an armoured car? At least he was dry inside the cockpit: guaranteed watertight. But a Mercedes designed for the tropics should be equipped with a periscope. Can there ever have been a time when it wasn't raining? The puddles had turned into lakes; and the steep road, having no gutters or drains, was now a swirling torrent. In this country even the rain seemed to prefer revolution to reform. Oh, for the social democratic drizzle of the Jura! Here it rains all summer, and they call

the summer winter. Their whole world is upside down. We definitely don't speak the same language. Oh, Celia, whom can I trust?

Eight forty-nine. Frank checked the gear lever. He switched on the demister to clear the windows. And he turned on the radio, to stop himself from thinking. As usual, local folk-music. When he had come to spy out the ground, the weather had been fine. *And* when he had come to try the thing out, watch in hand, in a little Fiat. He had passed the other car twice, and each time it was between eight thirty and eight forty-five. Business is business, and time is money, just as much for Italians as for Yankees.

The road bent round in a fairly wide arc as it went up the hill: from its first appearance, a car coming down would take twenty seconds to draw level with him. Forty, presumably, in this rain. Barring accidents – a lorry coming up, a car getting between them, a pedestrian suddenly deciding to cross – this was an ideal spot: the roadway was too narrow to allow of any manoeuvring, and the bend too sharp to risk accelerating, especially downhill. The road was on a ledge of ground running across a kind of no-man's-land. Below, towards the city, the ground sloped steeply down, covered in scrub; at this moment water was pouring down it, and a landslide looked imminent. Above, a *rancho* lay spread out on the hillside. Frank had parked his car on the right, facing uphill, on the same side as the *rancho* with its wide dirt roads. He was a little past the central road that ran down into the street, not wanting some pedestrian to cross in front of him at the wrong moment. Behind and above him, he could just see a group of black boys in white pants, joyfully soaping themselves in the rain – getting a free shower. Up in the *rancho*, the wooden huts had to be baled out in a storm like ships at sea, and Frank saw bucketfuls of water sloshing out at regular intervals from their open front doors. From

the zinc roofs too, held down against the wind by large stones, cascades of water descended to swell the torrent in the main drain. An elegant black lady came down towards the car, stepping stiffly and carefully, her shoes in one hand, a scarlet parasol in the other to keep out the rain. Damn, she's going to ask me for a lift. But no, she crossed without even a glance. Perhaps they thought he was a ponce visiting his relatives, or some upper class sex maniac on the lookout for little girls. Whatever it was, amazingly, no one seemed to notice the Mercedes.

Eight fifty-three. From trying to keep his eyes on the whole of the road at once, Frank gradually lost all sense of space and time. He felt totally disorientated. It was such a dark morning, too – perhaps it was really eight fifty-three in the evening? The few cars that passed had their lights on. The Latin dance music coming from the radio poured out its trills and flourishes, strings vibrating harshly in unresolved harmonies and abrupt tremolos, monotonous though irregular, which matched well with the drumming of the rain on the car. Frank pictured flooded savannas, weary horses whinnying under the lacy leaves of the carob-trees against the evening sky, skulls of cattle stuck up on posts like totems above the water in which alligators floated among the mangroves. He pictured roseate forests, the fire in the clearing, the dawn departure – setting off to follow a stream, jumping from rock to rock with lianas for handrails. And he pictured the rainy season in the *sierra* – the hardest thing of all in a guerrilla's life – boots squelching, teeth chattering, no dry clothes to change into for days and nights on end. He would never have the endurance for that; he wasn't made for the *sierra* and its grinding stoicism. It had to be in one's bones, a something going right back to childhood. Frank had *never* liked water – not in any form: not swimming pools, not the sea, not rain. Terrorists who can stay in the dry are the lucky ones. Cosy and warm, snugly ensconced in his car with

the windows shut tight, he felt ashamed. He thought of Heydrich's assassins in the church in Resslova Street, with the water rising in the crypt, and the fire-engines drowning them like rats. At least he could always fire his last bullet into his own brain. No, he would never be going to the *sierra*.

He leant backwards, and discovered that by narrowing his eyes he could make the centre of the steering-wheel with its three spokes a rifle sight, to align with the Mercedes emblem on the bonnet.

The white coupé had turned into the road even more slowly than he had expected, but he recognized it at once. Gliding with the ease of a thoroughbred; sidelights on. Frank turned on the windscreen-wipers just long enough to check that there were in fact two men inside. Then, without lights on, he set his car in motion, rolling down the side-window with his left hand. When they were thirty yards apart, nothing in the rearview mirror *kickdown*; he put his foot right down on the accelerator, changing down to give the engine a spurt of power, and roared up the curve with the needle rising to fifty, sixty. The spray flung up by his front wheels reached eye-level, splashing his arm. He wrenched the wheel round to the left, and rammed the coupé head on, with a crash of broken glass from its headlamps, and a blaring from its horn. He just had time to recognize Rossi beside the driver, but the impact flung him against the wheel. He pushed himself back with his forearms, calmly, grabbed the folded raincoat on his knees with his right hand, and put his left shoulder to the door. His was the heavier tank of the two: he had forced the other over, and its offside front wheel was suspended over the edge where the ground fell away. The two men still sat where they were, and Frank positioned himself facing them and pulled his Star out from under his raincoat. He was almost squatting, head down, arms held out horizontally, holding the gun in

both hands. He couldn't see their features clearly for the rain, though he was no more than three yards from the windscreen; but as the wipers came and went he got brief glimpses of Rossi – pop-eyed, incredulous, moving jerkily like a puppet. The door of the coupé opened, and all at once, Giani was out, his gun ready; Frank barely had time to swing his gun round towards the unsteady blurred figure. He fired twice, three times, and the man fell sideways, clutching his thigh: he tried to crawl away along the road, gasping, '*Me dió el carajo, me dió el carajo,*' his voice getting fainter and fainter. Meanwhile, Rossi had opened his door, but he was hesitating, not daring to leap down into the bushes below, possibly because he could see no solid spot to take his weight. Frank pivoted round to face him, and again pressed the trigger. Nothing happened: either the breech was blocked or the bullet wasn't properly engaged. Now Rossi's head was no longer in view: he had hunched down into his seat and was trying to coil himself into the footspace in front under the dashboard, like some gross foetus. In a transport of rage, Frank took his revolver by the barrel and hurled it as hard as he could at the windscreen, which shattered into a filigree of opaque crystals. Then, taking a step backwards, he took an oval object out of his jacket pocket. He pulled out the pin, and quite gently, his anger spent, like a child playing marbles he rolled the grenade under the wheels of the car.

There was a muffled explosion: the car rose into the air, and returned to earth a mass of flames. A lifeless form hung through the open door to Frank's left, a dummy broken in the middle. Frank stood where he was, arms hanging at his sides, stunned by the explosion, watching the flames as they sputtered in the rain. Then, all of a sudden, 'My Mercedes is going to go up too,' he thought, and he staggered back, still half-blind from the flames dancing before his eyes. The rain was now coming down

slightly less heavily. On the embankment, on the other side of the road, a row of almost naked children stood gazing wonderment in at this glorious bonfire. 'Get away from here!' Frank shouted, gesticulating towards his car, 'this one's going to explode too.' And he illustrated his point by starting to run along the road. But two hammer-blows in the lumbar region brought him down. It didn't hurt very much. He did not even make a connexion between the burst of gunfire that assailed his ears and the pain that suddenly bored into his back. He toppled over into a puddle, making no effort to save himself. He felt suddenly happy, happier than he had ever felt before; at peace with himself at last. The sun broke through, and its glow lit up the world, turning the rain into an April shower. Its large, slow drops fell into his open eyes, and little rivulets ran down his temples. He was carried away by the most intense jubilation: a seraphic dawn rose up from within him, the clouds racing to escape, rushing away into the funnel of the sky to some invisible point in the distance. Like a sudden triumphant fanfare, a rainbow formed over the city, dispersing the last of the raindrops and revealing a world refurbished. He was smiling as he saw this glorious newness, slightly distorted as it was by the pearls of water on his eyelashes, when suddenly he realized – too late, he was always, always too late – that he had left his folder with all his notebooks in it in the car. 'Oh God, let it burn,' he said to himself over and over, 'let it burn.' He tried to get up, to pull himself along, but he could not move. He felt his back bathed in a warm fluid which then seemed to fill him totally, and came up into his throat. People around him were calling and running; someone tried to raise one of his arms, but that was too late too. He went on sinking, slipping away, suffocating. A little Indian girl broke away from the group of children and leant over him. All he could see were her huge black eyes, and the greenness of her gaze. She looked at him

fearfully, and with that slight pity one might feel for a stranger who had lost his way. Her lips were moving; she was asking him something, but he could not understand. She was already too far off, being whisked rapidly away from him, back and back, like the clouds. He tried hard to speak, to warn her; the words ran through him in one last cry: 'Hide, Celia, hide! they're coming!'

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

'Another Castroist agent. You can tell from his face he's a foreigner.'

And with distaste the officer let the body fall back on the ground. The head hit the asphalt with a dull thud like a melon. He had finished his search. The sun had dried the rain-tears on Frank's cheeks.

A police cordon kept the crowd back. In the middle were three police patrol cars and two jeeps. An ambulance waited a few yards away.

'Any papers?'

'His wallet is empty, sir. Three hundred-peso notes in one pocket, but no identification of any kind.'

'Any photos?'

'No, nothing.'

'Well, get him fingerprinted, and call the civil police. I don't know why I've been brought here – anyone'd think I had nothing else to do.'

The officer was already going back to his jeep – one could see that it was his from the long aerial arched across its roof. A sergeant came running up with a bundle in his hands, and whispered something to the lieutenant, who called his superior back.

'Sir! We've found a plastic folder in the car. It's got notebooks in it – a lot of writing.'

The senior officer came back looking irritated, not to say exasperated. 'Let's see,' he said, wearily.

There were three stiff-covered exercise books, all slightly different shapes, all with school graph paper inside. He leafed idly through the pages, covered in spidery writing. On the fly-sheet of the first, in the top right-hand corner, was written in red felt-tip: 'Strictly private – Not for publication.' Major Espinoza was torn between curiosity and a vague fear that it might be some kind of trap.

'It's written in some foreign language,' he said. His eyes had brightened, and the boredom had vanished from his face.

'If you'll excuse me, sir, I think it is French,' murmured the young lieutenant respectfully, peering over his shoulder.

'What do you know about it? You can't think they send out instructions from the international communist centre in ordinary French! Why, it might be plans for a rebellion! Obviously the whole thing is in code.'

'But those are ordinary words, sir, not code. . . Or do you mean that what we can read is just a cover, and that there's invisible ink underneath?'

'Ye gods – are they still at the lemon juice stage at the military academy? Don't they teach you about the new techniques? They use cryptograms that look perfectly normal – seems quite harmless, but it's actually most sophisticated.' Then, after a moment's thought, 'I suppose one might manage it with a computer –'

'Yes, sir,' said the young lieutenant eagerly. 'I'll get onto HQ by radio straight away, and they can let the Ministry of the Interior know. Their code people can start at once.'

'Just a minute, Lieutenant, I'd like a word with you first.' And, taking him by the arm, 'Not as your superior officer, but as a colleague – and a citizen,' he added, lowering his voice and drawing him to one side. 'There's subversion everywhere today, you know. I imagine you're aware of that. In the Ministry of the Interior and the police, and from information received we have reason to fear

subversion even inside the government. They've managed to infiltrate every civilian organization.'

He coughed discreetly to clear his throat, and then continued, lower still: 'The Armed Forces have a special service. When there's armed insurrection going on we have to use the same weapons the enemy is using – we must be just as cunning as they are. No one knows what the future holds. We've got to be prepared for all eventualities. Now, fortunately, our friends at the embassy have helped us to set up something a bit more effective – and a lot more confidential: it's just an ordinary commercial organization, with offices in the city. And that's where I'm going to take these documents. But the police mustn't know anything about it – or the ministry. Do I make myself clear, Lieutenant?'

'Oh yes, you can rely on me, sir! I've heard about this before – you're talking about the *Reader's Digest* Club in Calle Jacopo, aren't you?'

The major's face became purple; stamping his foot on the ground, he said angrily, 'I didn't hear you say anything just then, Lieutenant. You did not speak.'

'Of course not, sir. Whatever you say, sir.'

'Only our military superiors are going to be told about this. In due course. Of course we'll be giving the President a full report later on if we're successful. I'll leave you to get on with your arrangements here.'

The lieutenant saluted, swung round and went off to give the patrol cars the order to disperse.

'“The underground has its own aristocracy – an aristocracy of absence”: what the hell does that mean? “The highest title of all is conferred by death.”’ Maybe it didn't mean anything. Maybe it was just a trick, to fool them and waste their time. Maybe they wouldn't succeed in breaking the code after all. Oh well, not to worry! The department experts knew their business – they'd certainly break this one.

Major Espinoza threw out his chest and marched stiffly to his jeep. He could almost feel the colonel's emblem he'd waited so long for on his epaulettes.

'Driver, drop me at the corner of Calle Jacopo and Calle Malaparte. I'll make my own way back to headquarters.'

'Yes, sir. And after that?'

'After that? – Oh, your time's your own. I won't be needing you again today.'